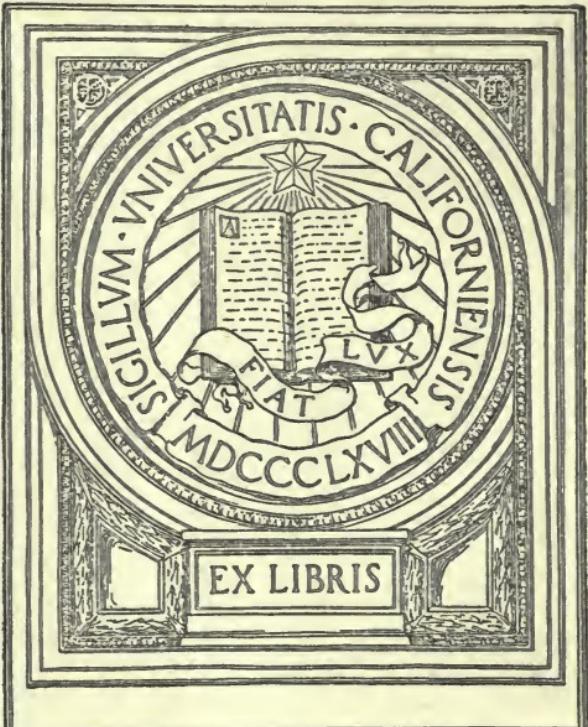


Gift Of The Desert

Randall Parrish





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GIFT OF THE DESERT



His iron grip closed on the bit of her horse,
and the animals stopped short

Gift of the Desert

By RANDALL PARRISH

AUTHOR OF

"*Beyond the Frontier*," "*Bob Hampton of Placer*," "*Comrades of Peril*," "*The Case and the Girl*," "*The Devil's Own*," "*The Mystery of the Silver Dagger*," "*Wolves of the Sea*," etc.



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GIFT OF THE DESERT

Gift of the Desert

CHAPTER I

THE CHOICE

IT WAS a wonderful thing to be twenty-three, full of hope and ambition, and in the wide out-of-doors; more wonderful still to possess the glorious memory of nearly two years in the hospitals of France, six months of that time just behind the American fighting line. Yet the girl was not thinking of this then as she sat there alone at the edge of the ravine, gazing silently off across the dull leagues of desert to where a distant blue range of mountains cut off the view with their ragged summits. It was a marvelous, somber scene stretched out below, a drear desolation, without movement or the slightest semblance of life. An hour ago it had been wrapped in heat waves, a misty miracle, sometimes appearing as a vast sea, but now, as the sun sank slowly behind those distant serrated peaks, darker shadows lay along the level surface, with gleams here and there of gray and red, while arching over all hung the clear Arizona sky, slowly turning to purple.

Nor was she thinking of these magic changes. She had noted them all, appreciative of their beauty, and comparing that sun-kissed vista with other sunsets in France and Germany, when the ground was yet red with the blood of sacrificed manhood. Her heart ached still with the sad memory that would not die—hours of toil, scenes of suffering. But this mood had also passed away, and now, although her eyes were still upon that outspread picture below, her thought had centered upon the present in a dull wonderment at the strange situation surrounding her. Why had she ever consented to come to this place? to this jumping-off spot of creation? Why had she ever listened to the plea of old Tom Meager, back there in Chicago, and finally, partially from pity, partially from that new love of adventure engendered within her by service across the water, agreed to come West with him? Of course, she never had dreamed what it really would be like—life on this vast isolated ranch along the southern border, with the drear desert stretching away on every side from this little oasis of water and grass. Tom Meager had never told the whole story; he had dwelt on the loneliness of his sick wife, the chance she had of regaining health, with proper nursing and care; the rare beauty of the sunsets, the wonderful glow of the cool desert nights, the wild, free existence of the range, filled

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with excitement and a dash of danger. It all had appealed to her strangely — the service, the complete change in environment, the escape from the humdrum life of the Marine Hospital. The pay was good, the opportunity excellent, and she had said "yes" without half realizing then what it all meant.

But she realized now. Those first few weeks had been glorious indeed. She found everything new, attractive, tinged with romance and color. She liked Mrs. Meager, and discovered her task to be an easy one, her time largely at her own disposal. So far as labor was concerned, the position was ideal; she was companion rather than nurse. But it was lonely, terribly lonely; and, after those first few weeks nothing seemed to occur to break the dull monotony. It was sixty miles over a half-obliterated desert trail to the nearest town, and that little more than a general store, and a cattle corral. The only link between there and the civilization she had left to the eastward, were the glistening rails of a railroad skirting the edge of the hills, and vanishing amid the sand. Once or twice a day a train passed east or west, a wisp of smoke showing on the horizon, only to be quickly blown away by the never-ceasing wind.

Day by day, week following week, she saw the same faces, heard the same voices. Riders from the outer

range came in with their reports, bringing tales of Mexican raiders, or of cattle strayed into the desert. Once a party of rangers rode by on the trail of a horse thief, and once again a squad of cavalrymen from some frontier fort farther to the north camped overnight behind the stables. By dawn they were gone. Whenever she could she rode about with old Tom Meager, in and out the ravines, and occasionally far beyond into the vast sand plains, listening to his quaint tales of adventures, and helping him round up bunches of strayed stock. She became expert in the saddle, learned to use a gun skilfully, and even picked up some knowledge of the lariat. Thus, little by little, she had adapted herself to the rough life, determined to keep her word, but nevertheless growing constantly more and more heartsick.

Then Tom Meager came to his death. Riding home alone from Nogales at night, in the dark of Silver Canyon, his horse slipped and fell, and Meager lay there on the rocks motionless. A packer found his body the next day, and brought it on to the ranch. In some way the message of the old man's passing crossed the border line down far into old Mexico, until it reached the ears of his son, God alone knows where. Three days after the burial this wanderer of many years returned, drove his saddle horse into the corral, and assumed control.

Whatever might be his legal right, there was none to oppose his bold assumption of authority, or management. The widow lay helpless on her bed; she was not the boy's mother, and he never so much as crossed the threshold of her room. If there had been a will, no one searched for it, or made inquiries. By sheer force and audacity Bob Meager took command, asking permission of no one.

For some days after his arrival the girl did not even encounter this new master. She dared not leave her patient either day or night, and the man was never at the ranchhouse except to fling himself on the bed and sleep. From dawn to dark he was in the saddle, familiarizing himself with every detail of his new possessions. She had no desire to meet him, for long ago his story had been told to her—not by old Tom, who never spoke his son's name, or the patient, invalid wife, but by others, long in the Meager service, glad now of an opportunity to gossip with a stranger. It was a story of brutal shame; of base ingratitude, verging on crime; of sudden disappearance; of vague rumors floating back from here and there, bearing the tale of a wild, disreputable life. To her Bob Meager had become the synonym of all that was evil in this borderland. Yet now, through some strange play of fate, he was here, and she was left helplessly in his power, under his

orders, wholly dependent on him for employment. The thought was almost maddening.

They finally met the morning of the fifth day, unexpectedly, when, without even knocking, the fellow strode into the widow's room unceremoniously. The girl, in her nurse's uniform, arose hastily to her feet, and confronted the rude intruder indignantly, her eyes blazing with sudden antagonism. Meager came to a surprised halt, staring straight at her in astonishment.

"Who are you?" he asked gruffly, yet with a measure of doubt in the tone. "Some poor relative?"

"Not quite as bad as that," she answered, resenting his manner, yet endeavoring to control her speech. "I am Mrs. Meager's nurse."

"Nurse!" he sneered sarcastically. "Good Lord, so the old man stood for that, did he? Well, you can hardly expect me to; it is more than my mother ever had. Do you know who I am?"

"I presume you must be Robert Meager."

"You guessed right, and I've come back here to run this ranch; you get me?"

"Quite clearly—yes."

She spoke so coldly, with so little apparent interest, as instantly to anger him.

"Oh, you do, hey? Then I'll enlighten you further. You're Mrs. Meager's nurse, you said? Pretty soft

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job, isn't it? I don't believe there will be any necessity for her having a nurse very long. What's your name?"

"Deborah Meredith."

He laughed, showing a row of cruel white teeth.

"Sounds like a story book; where did the old man pick you up?"

"My home is in Chicago."

"Well, he certainly showed good taste, I'll say that for him. You are some good-looker, Deborah Meredith. I'm damned if I don't rather like your style."

He stared at her insolently, his glance appraising form and features much as he might take in the points of some animal he contemplated purchasing. The girl's face flushed indignantly, but her eyes never fell.

"You sure do look good to me," he announced finally, "and I don't believe I'll fire you—not yet, anyhow."

"It will not be at all necessary," she said quietly. "I shall attend to that for myself."

"You will? You mean you'll quit?"

"I certainly shall."

"Oh, hell! Spunky little tigress, ain't you? I reckon I'll have something to say about that."

"You mean you will compel me to remain whether I wish to, or not?" she asked in surprise. "Why, that cannot be done; I am not a slave."

"It can't, hey? Do you know where you are?"

"Certainly, I do."

"By God, I doubt it. This is the Meager ranch in Arizona. There ain't another outfit within fifty miles, and nothing else round us but desert; there ain't no water, and no grass. I'm a-runnin' things here, and you bet I know how to run them. There ain't no gay galoot coming in here to tell Bob Meager what he shall do, an' what he shan't do. You get me? I'm the boss; before another week's out every white man on this ranch will be hunting a job, and there'll be Mex in their places. I know how to handle Mex; they'll do what I say — you bet they will. So Miss Deborah Meredith, how is it you're going to quit before ever I say you can? Aim to hoof it across the alkali to Nogales? Ten miles o' that stuff would break your heart. You better think it over."

She stood erect, looking directly at him, fully realizing his power and ruthlessness, yet still unbelieving that this was more than a mere idle threat. She saw him now clearly in the light of the window, and, in spite of her natural courage, the girl's heart sank. Was there any act of brutality the man would be incapable of? He looked the very incarnation of force, of ungovernable, unrestrained temper. He was big, burly, with broad shoulders and a deep chest, almost a giant of a man,

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but it was the face which bespoke his character. Brute was written plainly all over it, seemingly imprinted on every feature, finding clearest expression in the bold, staring eyes, and the bullying chin, yet, at the moment, she did not fear him; instinctively she felt the coward skulking back of his brutishness, confident that in the end he would never dare execute his boast.

"I prefer," she said quietly, "not to discuss the matter now. Surely this was not why you came in here?"

"I sure like your nerve, little girl," he admitted admiringly. "No, I didn't come exactly for that, but whatever brought me, I've changed my mind. We'll let things go on just as they are at present, I reckon. But don't you ever imagine I am playing with you; law don't count for much out here, sister, an' what I say goes."

She watched him as he turned and went out the door, her hands clinched, a wave of intense hatred surging over her. Yet in another moment she had conquered herself, and moved quietly back to the side of the bed on which her patient lay sobbing. She bent above the distressed woman.

"He is worse even than I thought," she said, unable to wholly hide her distress. "What caused him to come in here, do you suppose?"

"He came to send me away," answered the other, clasping the girl's hands. "I knew it would not be long; he has disliked me always."

"Send you away! Why you were his father's wife. Even if there was no will you must have dower rights in the estate. Surely, that is the law."

"I—I do not know," wearily. "Tom never explained anything to me, but—but I am afraid of Bob Meager. You don't know him yet, but I do; he will rule or ruin."

"He is only a big, blustering coward," burst forth Deborah indignantly, "bullying two women. I am not going to let him frighten me."

"Don't cross him; don't anger him," the other begged piteously. "He is dangerous just the same, and I am afraid of him, for your sake as well as my own."

"What do you want me to do?" the girl questioned, influenced by the timidity of the other. "Let that beast have his own way with me?"

"No—no, not that. But—but treat him fairly, Miss Meredith. He will not always be as he is today. As he said, you cannot fight or run away. All depends on winning his favor. Then sometime there will be a chance. We must wait and watch, until he is in a mood to let us both go. But even if there was a way for you

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to escape alone, you could not leave me here in his power."

"You fear him like that?"

"If I stand between the man and this fortune his father left, my life is worth nothing—I know that."

And Deborah Meredith, looking down into the white face lying on the pillow, made her choice.

CHAPTER II

MEAGER STATES HIS PLAN

IT WAS the memory of this scene — her promise to Mrs. Meager, and her dislike of Bob Meager — which left the girl unobservant of the desert view outspread below, and thoughtless of the descending night. She had sought this spot to be alone, to escape any possibility of encountering Bob, and to turn over once more in her mind the conditions which had made her virtually a prisoner. That dreary expanse of desert had brought home afresh her helplessness, the brutal truth of his words. It was three days since the interview, but she had not again met the man during that interval. Whether he was deliberately avoiding her, or merely busied about the endless work of the ranch, she was unable to determine, yet the very indifference thus shown had its effect on her imagination. Apparently he was so absolutely sure of her safety he felt no necessity for even a guard over her movements, or any call to repeat his threat. She had been left free to come and go at her will, while he ignored her very existence.

Yet she could not accept this seeming indifference as

real. There had been an expression in the man's eyes that had frightened her more than she would even confess to herself — an insolent boldness, a sneering dominance which haunted her memory with its sinister threat. He was playing with her as a cat plays with a mouse, biding the proper time to strike. He knew he could afford to wait; that she was utterly in his power. His very silence, and aloofness, increased her alarm, her dread of the morrow. Her dislike of the fellow had grown into a bitter hatred, while every change about the ranch seemed to draw the chains of captivity closer around her. His insolent neglect left the impression that it also was a part of the game.

Not a day passed without witnessing a change in the personnel of the ranch. She might not have observed this, but for her own personal fear and suspicion. Old Tom Meager would never employ a Mexican on the place, nor trust them; but now, one by one, the old hands disappeared, while swarthy-skinned riders appeared mysteriously to take their places. Where they came from, how the word had been sent abroad, she could not surmise, yet every day she missed familiar faces, and discovered new ones about the bunkhouse. Even the old-time cook vanished finally, to be replaced by a Chinaman, while a Mexican girl appeared suddenly to assume charge of the ranchhouse. Within six

days the transformation was practically complete, and Bob Meager was surrounded by those of his own kind. Creatures of his will, denizens of that world he knew best. This change was, to Deborah's mind, ominous of evil; it increased her fear, and rendered more difficult any possibility of escape. The walls closed her more tightly in. As she saw the strange faces and fanciful costumes of these new arrivals, and heard their native language spoken, she realized more and more vividly her own increasing helplessness, and shrank from confronting the future. What was the true meaning of all this? What did this man plan to do with her? The questions could not be answered; she could only wait fearfully for his actions to make reply. Yet it must be evil; she could conceive nothing else in Bob Meager's heart.

Again and again the puzzled, troubled girl went over in memory every word the man had uttered, every act of his since he came. Her thought was not with the wild desert scene outstretched before her, or the beauty of that red sunset behind those far-off peaks. She was not even conscious of her more immediate surroundings, remaining totally oblivious to the solitary horseman, approaching along the barely discernible trail skirting the edge of the mesa. The horse was moving slowly, with wearily drooping head, and on the hard-

beaten sand the hoofs made no noise sufficient to disturb her. The rider lolled in the deep Mexican saddle, with sombrero pulled down low over his eyes, seemingly as tired as the half-broken mustang he bestrode, and occasionally hectored with a sharp spur. The two climbed the steeper ascent leading up the side of the mesa, winding about among the mesquite, and finally emerging amid the chaparral above. It was on the farther edge of this that the horseman suddenly perceived the girl, her white skirt showing conspicuous in the purple light, and quickly held up his pony. A glow came into his tired eyes as he made sure of her identity, and he leaned forward over the pommel watching her resting there motionless. She had evidently neither seen nor heard his approach, and he swung silently down from the saddle, dropping the mustang's rein over the animal's head, before advancing toward her on foot. It was not until he had reached a very few yards of her position that Deborah became aware of some presence near, and arose instantly to her feet, facing him in sudden alarm. It was too late then to flee; the man blocked the only path available.

"Frightened you, did I?" he asked carelessly, flipping a weed with his quirt, but with searching eyes on her face. "You must have been in some daydream, I'll say."

She caught her breath sharply in an effort at self-control.

"I—I was thinking," she answered, a little catch in the voice, but as instantly determining to tell the truth, and thus learn, if possible, his purpose, "of what you intended to do with me. I—I cannot continue to bear things as they are."

"Why, they are not so bad, are they?" he asked provokingly, but making no effort to advance. "This is the same ranch to which you came voluntarily; I have not cut down your wages, and the food, and all that, is just as good. Do you mean you don't like it here any longer?"

"I certainly do not under the circumstances. I am no longer here of my own free will."

"Oh, is that it? Well, perhaps we can remedy that trouble. In fact, that is the very matter I rather wanted to talk to you about. It is mighty lucky I found you out here all alone, where maybe we can come to an understanding. Sit down there again while we talk it over."

"I prefer to stand."

"All right then, only it ain't going to do you no good to be offish about it. I'll tell you that at the start. You ought to know by this time that I ain't the playing sort. Found any way to leave yet? I reckon not, or you wouldn't be here. Well, that lesson ought to mean

something to you. I've left you alone for three days now, just to let it sink in."

"That I could not escape from here without assistance?"

"Sure; there ain't no way for a woman—a tenderfoot—to get across that desert without help of some kind, and a horse. I reckon you are smart enough to know that. It was mostly on your account I sent them old punchers away, an' got a lot o' Mex in to ride herd, an' do whatever odd jobs were needed. You ain't liable to pick up no friendships with that gang. Knew some of the old hands, didn't you?"

"A few," she admitted. "I rode about considerably at first."

"So I heard tell. Now there ain't nobody round who cares a whoop in hell what happens. You better let that fact soak in, too, first of all. Then it will be easier for us to come to an understanding."

"An understanding?" she asked in surprise. "You desire to explain then? Yet first you threaten me?"

He laughed.

"Threaten, hell! I don't have to threaten; I'm holding all the cards." He took a step forward, and, as the girl drew slightly back from his approach, his face quickly darkened with anger. "You don't want me to touch you, hey? or come near you? All right,

I'll wait, but just the same you'll do just what I tell you to. Sit down there on that log. I've got quite a bit to say to you yet an' I don't want you standing up there, staring at me. You hear me? Sit down!"

She took the place designated, realizing the utter uselessness of refusal, while he remained standing, with one foot insolently planted on the log beside her. Through the gathering dusk she could see his face and its expression was far from reassuring. He was brutally sure of his power.

"Very well," she said, forcing a strange calmness into her voice, "I will listen to what you have to say."

"Listen! I rather guess you will. I like your damn nerve, but you'll find out I've got some myself. Now, see here, Miss Deborah Meredith. A week ago I didn't even know you existed. But after we had that little seance together the other day in the old lady's room, I made up my mind that I was going to give you a lesson. You didn't like me, did you?"

He stopped, but she did not answer, although her eyes met his own.

"Come on! talk up. I know you didn't; but I want to hear you say so."

"It certainly is true."

"Sure it's true. Why in hell shouldn't it be? The old man had filled you full —"

"Your father never once spoke of you to me."

"Then my precious stepmother did."

"Only in reply to some questions, but nevertheless, I knew. I am not going to deny that I was prejudiced against you, and your conduct and words the other day were not likely to change my opinion. If it is necessary for me to answer, I will—I do not like you, Bob Meager."

The man grinned almost cheerfully.

"Some fellows might get mad at that, but I don't. I rather enjoy it. Why? Because I've got you where it don't make any damn difference. That's why. As long as I want you, I'm going to have you. I knew exactly how you felt, and maybe that was what made me swear I'd have you anyhow. I don't care what you think o' me. Likely I'm even worse than that; but from the first minute I seen you in that white uniform, I made up my mind you was the girl I wanted; and I made up my mind, too, that it wasn't any use of my trying to make love to you—not a damn bit. You'd just laugh at that. So I went to work and figured out another way."

"To get me?" in growing horror. "To get me? for what?"

"Oh, it's all going to be honorable, so don't let that worry you now. This is going to be a square deal, only

I handle the cards—see? The first thing I had to do was to build a hog-tight fence around this ranch, so you couldn't get out. Nature helped some, for with forty miles of desert one way, and sixty the other, there wasn't much chance left. But I thought maybe you had made friends with some of those cowboys, and the safest way was to clean them all out, and get Mexican herders instead. They'd do whatever I said, and kick up no fracas. Well, there was plenty of that kind to be had, and now there ain't another white man left on the place. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes," slowly, "I know that."

"It's worth thinking over; it means I'm the boss; that what I say here goes. I ain't been bothering you any meanwhile. I hain't spoken to you since that first time. There wasn't no use. I saw in your eye what sort o' girl you was, and just about what you thought o' me. But I'd made up my mind what I was after, and how I was going to get it. I didn't have any notion of coming to you again until I had the cards stacked—see?"

"And—and now you—you are ready to play, and have come?"

"Correct. I can't lose. You got to do what I say, whether you like it or not. Maybe you don't just get this straight? Well, listen. In the first place I am

Bob Meager, and, I reckon, you never heard nothin' very soft about me. It's pretty generally known around here that I am a he-man, and that I usually get what I go after. You know that, don't you?"

"I—I have heard of your methods—yes."

"I thought most likely you had. Well, that's one point. I ain't the kind to play soft with; when I get my hair up I'm a bear-cat. The second point is, I'm the real boss of this ranch; it's mine, and I've got the papers to prove it. Now, do you get the picture?"

It was almost dark, but she could still distinguish his face, as he leaned forward peering at her. There was no doubt as to the real meaning of the man, and she comprehended fully her own helplessness of resistance. All she could hope to do now was to cause delay, to thus win a chance to think and act. Her breath seemed to choke her, and almost prevent speech, and yet her mind desperately grasped at this one opportunity.

"Yes," she managed to say, marveling at the calmness with which she spoke, and now on her feet facing him. "I think I know what you mean. You have me completely in your power; you have planned it all out, and now there isn't a friend here whom I can call on for help, while no way of escape has been left open. That is what you want me to realize, I suppose that I know your full power."

"That's the ticket. Now there ain't no use your getting mad. I like you; I like you awfully well, and I'm going to be mighty square with you. But there wasn't any other way for me to get you—was there?"

"No," she said frankly, "there was no other course possible."

"Which means you don't like me at all?"

"It means all of that, and more, Bob Meager. I do not believe I ever despised anyone so much in my life as I do you. I disliked you before I ever saw you; now I hate the very ground you walk on. Have you any use for me after that?"

"You just bet I have," he grinned. "You're sure a wildcat, but I'll tame you. Damn it! I like it in you; you're not the wishy-washy kind. One of us has got to be boss; I saw that from the very first, and that's what this means now; I'm going to be the one."

"In what way do you mean?"

"Haven't you got the idea yet? I'm going to marry you—see? I took the notion the first time I saw you—you're exactly my style. But I know'd then there wasn't but one way to do it. Now I'm ready to talk business. How is it, my lady, going to be nice about it?"

She endeavored to rally her courage, even attempting a laugh.

"Marry you? Not in this world. I know you are

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a scoundrel, but I never thought you were a fool before."

"No, and you never will again," his voice hardening. "Because you will have no chance. It is nothing to me whether you say yes, or no. I been down in Nogales today, an' among other things I got a marriage license. It's right here in my pocket, an' the names written in it are 'Robert Meager and Deborah Meredith.' And that ain't all; sometime between now and ten o'clock a justice of the peace is going to drive in here to do up the business for us. That's why I'm telling you all this — so you can sorter brace up, and get ready."

She made no attempt to move, or to speak; she seemed paralyzed, staring at him through the gathering darkness.

"I ain't going to touch you now," he went on sullenly, angered by her silence. "But you just think it over, and go on back to the house. When I send for you, you better come; that's all."

He turned, and walked back to his horse, and she stood there, trembling in every limb, as he vanished amid the shadows.

CHAPTER III

THE MESSAGE FROM THE BUNKHOUSE

DEBORAH sank back upon the log, her eyes following the dim outline of the man's burly figure until it disappeared along the trail leading toward the ranchhouse. He did not mount the horse, but plunged forward on foot, the animal trailing behind. The sound of movement died away, and about her was impressive stillness. She could hear the rapid beating of her own heart, the grating as her fingers convulsively dug into the soft bark of the log. She understood now, clearly, definitely, just what she was called upon to face. Bob Meager had not minced his words, or left anything to imagination. He had been brutally frank, revealing his real nature in all he had said and done. She had no illusions; he had planned this deliberately, in cold blood, and he had the will, and, perhaps, the power, to carry it out.

At first she was in a white flame of indignation; she even laughed hysterically at the fellow's threat. It seemed preposterous, absurd, a dream of delirium. Marry him! Marry that degenerate brute! Why, she would rather die a hundred deaths than have him even

touch her. She hated, despised him, and there flashed to her mind one memory after another of what had been told her of his past—cowardly, cruel deeds, spoken of in whispers; a shooting affray in Nogales; a woman deserted and left to die; an arrest for robbery somewhere in New Mexico; a duel over a gambling table; a rumor of gun-running across the Mexican border—these were but part of what she had heard before they ever met. Now she read the truth pictured in the man's face and manner, and shrank from him in horror. He was a foul, brutal cur! Yet even as she realized this, shrinking in terror from any possible contact with him, there arose in her mind a sense of fear, a grim, persistent fear she could not conquer.

He was ruthless, merciless. If he truly desired her, nothing would be permitted to stand in his way; he would hesitate at no crime in the gratification of aroused passion. He had not been drinking when he talked with her; he had spoken soberly and with full knowledge of what he said. Fiendish as it was, he had acted deliberately and in cold blood. That made it all the more dangerous, for he would likely drink now and become an utter fiend. Within an hour he would be raging drunk, capable of any indignity, any wild act. A brute sober, he became a demon drunk. And she must face it—alone! This was the conviction that

slowly took full possession of her mind. At first she failed wholly to realize the situation. It seemed to be too outrageous to be possible, but gradually the bitter truth came home, leaving her stupefied and helpless. This was no dream, but a fact. His threat was not an idle one. He could turn contemptuously away and leave her there, completely confident that she could not escape. She was in his toils as utterly as though he had her locked in a room, or trussed her about with a rope's end. There was no spot of safety to which she could fly, no friend to whom she could appeal. Her apparent freedom was a mere mirage; she was a prisoner in a cell — her cell this isolated ranch, surrounded by leagues of impassable desert.

She gazed hopelessly out into the black void; not a light gleamed anywhere except from those distant stars overhead. How terribly desolate it all was, long miles of sand and alkali, with nothing to break the drear monotony except stunted greasewood and cactus, among which wound the barely discernible trail. No glimmer of water, no shimmer of green, no animal or bird life amid the solitude. She remembered it all with a shudder, a deadening sense of facing the impossible. There was but one way leading across that expanse, the single trail connecting with the pass through the mountain canyon beyond. There might, of course, be others —

known to Indian or outlaw—but this path was the only one she ever had traveled. And it never could be traversed alone on foot. Perhaps if she had time in which to plan, to prepare, it might be done—food, water, a horse, a few hours start in the darkness, might lead to success—but, Meager had given her no opportunity. If she plunged forth into that black, trackless void afoot, it would be to certain death, unless his cowboys found her in time. The thought promised nothing but suicide, or recapture. She shrank back nerveless from the trial.

Yet, was there any other hope of escape? of postponement even? To appeal to Bob Meager would accomplish nothing. She knew the base heart of the man now if she never had before; he would only laugh, whether she came to him with reproaches or tears. And there was no one else—not a single white man left on the estate to her knowledge; not an officer of the law nearer than Nogales. The justice of the peace who was coming out to marry them! Bah! Whoever he was, he would assuredly be a creature of Meager's own choosing. Some despicable crony willing enough to obey orders for a price. No other kind would be employed under the circumstances. And Mrs. Meager would only break down and cry; under no conditions could she be of the slightest service, her terror of her

stepson was the real cause of her nervous breakdown. The whole deplorable affair must be concealed from her if possible.

No, there was absolutely no one to rely upon but herself. And what could she do? The girl stood up in the darkness, her hands gripped, her eyes on the opening through the chaparral leading toward the house—the trail along which Bob Meager had disappeared. She must follow him; there was nowhere else for her to go. She must face this thing alone, with all the desperate courage she could muster. Tears would accomplish nothing, nor bitter anger. If the worst came she must act, swiftly, decisively—even to killing the monster. There was no other choice left, no other possibility of escape. This awful necessity came to her almost as a relief. She felt justified, happy at making the final decision. Yes, she would do even that; she would do it rather than submit. It was the lesser evil of the two. But where could she procure a weapon? She possessed none of her own; had never dreamed of owning such a thing, yet they were plentiful enough about the ranch. Surely one could be easily secured, and, once in her possession, she knew how to handle it. Tom Meager had taught her that.

Impelled by this thought of self-defense, realizing clearly that she could turn nowhere else with any hope

of escaping this defilement; that she could neither flee the place nor find assistance, Deborah, the color high in her cheeks, her lips firm pressed in determination, advanced resolutely through the darkness toward the house. She would defend herself at all hazards; before she would submit to that brute she would shoot to kill. She had become desperate enough to find peace, and courage, in the decision.

The men of the home ranch were evidently at supper, the big dining-hall being lighted, and, as she slipped past the unshaded windows, she had glimpse of the fellows within and heard their voices conversing loudly in Spanish. They were a motley bunch, scarcely a face down the long table that was not vicious and depraved — the scum of Mexico, the majority exhibiting Indian blood, with not a familiar countenance among them. She lingered an instant in the shadows without, listening, but only shivered at the oaths which reached her ears. They were a precious gang of ruffians, indeed, worthy of their master, and the girl crept away, glad to escape the sound of their voices. There was a single dim light burning in the bunkhouse, but no sign of any occupant. Undoubtedly every hand on the place was at supper, and no better opportunity could be found in which to seek for, and appropriate, some forgotten weapon. She advanced cautiously, listening intently for

any sound, eager to accomplish her object. Once armed, she would feel more confident; the very touch of a weapon in her hand would bring her renewed courage.

The bunkhouse was a long building of adobe, the bunks lining the walls, open at both ends, the only light a lantern swung from a center beam. The glass of this was blackened with smoke, and only a dim radiance made the interior barely visible. However, there were no occupants; a glance through the open door convinced Deborah the place was temporarily deserted, yet that Mexican gang would soon be trooping out again from the dining-hall, and she would have but a few minutes in which to prosecute her search. Without hesitation, but with heart beating wildly, she slipped silently within, her eager eyes swiftly searching the vacant bunks and the wooden pegs above, on which dangled a miscellaneous collection of garments. In one corner was a pile of saddles and other horse accouterments; the whole place reeked with the smell of leather and was filthy in the extreme. The girl, nauseated by the foul odor, hesitated to penetrate farther, but a sudden outburst of laughter pealing through the open windows of the dining-hall, drove her desperately forward. Drawing her skirts close, she advanced gingerly, satisfied that if any occupant had left his belt behind it would be found in one of the bunks.

She had gone entirely down one side, and moved across to the other before she found what she sought, her heart leaping exultantly as she perceived the gleam of a steel barrel in the dim light. It lay fully exposed on top of a dirty blanket, a wicked-looking .44 in a well-worn holster, with a belt containing a half-dozen cartridges. She grasped these in her hands, conscious, even as she did so, of the sound of voices outside. The men were already returning; scarcely a moment remained before some of them would enter the upper door. The moment was sufficient to permit the frightened girl to dash out of the lower entrance into the darkness beyond, and crouch there, the prize still securely in her hands, waiting opportunity to steal away toward the protection of the ranchhouse. None of the fellows chose that entrance, but surged in through the other without a care in the world. The majority were using Spanish, very few words of which she could understand, but she gathered from what was said that the men anticipated a drunken revel later in the night and were quite delighted with the prospect.

The two who had entered first, however, stretched themselves out in bunks opposite each other, puffing vigorously on their cigarettes, and conversed in English, evidently proud of the accomplishment. One she recognized as Juan Sanchez, who had accompanied Bob

Meager on his return, and had since been made foreman, a swarthy, evil-eyed half-breed, with a long mustache and a livid scar on one cheek. She had heard he left Mexico in fear of his life, and he treated the men under him as slaves, lashing them with his quirt, and ruling them by fear. The other was an Indian, a mere boy, but with cruel mouth, and face hideous from pock-marks. Sanchez called him Pedro, yet talked to him as he might to a dog. It was the boy who questioned eagerly:

“Vat he say, señor? the man? I hear eet not all, the fools they make so mucha noise. We have *fiesta?*”

Sanchez blew a cloud of smoke into the polluted air, flipping the ash of his cigarette onto the floor.

“Plenty drink, Pedro,” he said indolently, “an’ no work tomorrow. The boss he marry.”

“Marry! the gringo? How that be again, señor?” and Pedro sat up, dangling his feet over the edge of the bunk.

Sanchez laughed grimly.

“Ah, Pedro, I forgot you were there. It was a great night, was it not; yet, Santa Anna! it counts for nothing this side the line. ’Tis no señorita of Mexico this time, but one of his own race, which is different; now he marry for long while.”

“He marry of his own race—here?”

"Sure; you have seen her; she cares for the old señora."

"The girl in white?"

"'Tis she; and *Madre de Dios*, I would it was I who had her, Pedro! Did ever you see such eyes? *Sacra!* I would ride through hell to make her smile on me."

"Pah!" indifferently, "she is too pale for my taste."

"Pale! with those cheeks and lips! My blood boils at dream of her kisses. I'd give every maid in Mexico for such as her."

"'Tis as your taste runs, señor; but how came she to love this fiend of an Americano?"

"Love him!" Sanchez rocked with laughter. "Hell! he has but spoke to her the once, to my knowledge. I doubt if she knows yet the happiness in store for her. 'Tis what I like about him; he does not ask, he takes. *Sacra!* he got the other so; she hated him, yet it made no difference. 'Twill be so now; the girl may not love him, but she will marry him when he say the word. Why? because she cannot help. It is an old game Señor Bob plays; he is the devil's own, Pedro."

The Indian crossed himself piously.

"*Dios*, 'tis true," he admitted; "have I not felt the smart of his whip? But he has the gold, señor, so what is it to us what he does with the girl?"

"You are right, Pedro," the other admitted grum-

blingly, "yet 'tis precious little of that gold we see or handle. Let's stop this chatter and win a bit of sleep before the bout begins."

Sanchez lay back upon the blankets, while the Indian stretched himself, his glance wandering over the bunch of Mexicans clustered at the other end of the hut. Evidently he saw nothing of interest there, for he also turned over and rested quietly with face to the wall. Deborah, scarcely venturing to breathe, her heart fluttering with terror, but her hands clasping tightly the heavy revolver, stole silently away through the darkness.

CHAPTER IV

THE COMING OF THE JUDGE

ASSURED that the way was clear, Deborah made a quick passage across the open space, a dim, ghostly figure fleeing through the night, and succeeded in obtaining entrance at the side door without being observed. Meager was in one of the front rooms, for, as she paused breathless in the hall, she heard him swear at the cook in Spanish, and the sound of his hated voice hurried her movements. Anything was preferable to a chance meeting with him.

First of all she must safely conceal the weapon she had stolen, which was too large and cumbersome to be carried upon her person. Its disappearance from the bunkhouse was sure to be discovered, and, while she would be the last one suspected of such a prank, it nevertheless must be securely hidden away. Her own room at the end of the hall, small, but neatly furnished, gave the greatest promise of security, and she felt a decided sense of relief when she finally thrust the weapon under various articles at the bottom of a bureau drawer. It was there, ready at hand, if an emergency arose, while she felt fully prepared to make use of it. The conver-

sation just overheard had strengthened her resolve to defend herself at all hazards.

Certain that nothing further would occur until after the arrival of the expected guests from Nogales, she stole into the room occupied by her patient, relieved to find Mrs. Meager sleeping soundly. She had dreaded the necessity of explaining to the woman the situation, and very willingly permitted her to sleep, covering her quietly, and then stealing silently back to the solitude of her own room to think. Locking the door, she sat down wearily at the window, which was slightly open, peering anxiously out into the night, the cool evening air of the desert caressing her hot cheeks. All appeared so calm and quiet without, it seemed impossible that a crisis was impending—that the lust, passion, brutality of man was only waiting the hour of outbreak. Her mind could scarcely comprehend the truth, or adjust itself to the reality of danger. With cheek resting on her arm, the girl's thoughts wandered, unable to center themselves wholly upon the problem she confronted. It seemed unreal, a dim, nebulous dream of imagination which must vanish with the dawn of another day.

Another day? What would it bring to her? Married to Bob Meager? death? or would she be a fugitive, with the stain of murder on her soul? She shuddered, the blood seeming to stop circulating in her veins, as

these questions brought home so nakedly the situation. It must be one of the three; there was no alternative. If she had retained any glimmer of doubt before as to the man's purpose toward her, it had vanished utterly as she listened to the conversation of those two accomplices in the bunkhouse. They had discussed her as coolly as they would the disposal of a steer from the range. They evidently thought as little about it. And Bob Meager had exhibited an equally brutal disregard. He had openly boasted of his purpose to those fellows, scattered money among them, no doubt, and promised them liquor in honor of the coming event. It was hideous. She was the butt of ridicule among that low gang; the object of laughter and coarse jokes; held as a mere chattel to be played with and then cast aside. God! it was enough to craze her. And, worst of all, the fellow was fully capable of this infamy. He was but repeating an old offense. Somewhere, down below those mountains that marked the boundary line, a girl of another race had met this same fate now confronting her, and was paying the price.

Well, she would never pay it, or if she must, then she would choose herself what that price should be. She felt at that moment that she could kill the brute as she would a mad dog. It was a duty, a privilege. He had no right to live, to prey on women, to insult and defame

her own womanhood. And there were no other means of escape. Again and again her mind swept about the unbroken circle; the chain binding her was complete; she could turn nowhere for help; she was absolutely a prisoner. The revolver hidden away in that bureau drawer alone promised protection. There were tears in her eyes, but not tears of weakness or of pity; her lips were firmly set, and her hands clasping the window sill were steady with determination. She had made up her mind.

The great stars overhead rendered the outside night dimly visible. She could see the bunkhouse, and the darker figures of men passing between her and the lantern glow within. Occasionally a loud voice reached her ears, or a peal of ribald laughter. At the hateful sound she clenched her teeth almost savagely, believing they were making mock of her misery. The rising desert wind rustled through the trees and rattled the window above, and afar off toward the stables a dog barked incessantly. Except for these sounds all was still, desolate. About her was primitive solitude; she felt the isolation as never before, picturing to her mind those leagues of barren sand in every direction, lying silent and black, hemmed in with barriers of rock, deserted and dead under those dim stars. She was alone—alone! Beyond law, justice, mercy even, with-

out a friend, a hope; a mere atom left to perish at the will of a brute. Even God had deserted her.

Her wrist watch had stopped, and she possessed no knowledge of the time, yet surely it must be late. The respite now would be short; those who were coming to carry out this mockery could not be delayed much longer. She even hoped now they would come; anything was better than this uncertainty, this horror of waiting. She began to long for the end, the call to face the inevitable. Far preferable now to act, rather than to continue to endure this awful strain of helpless anticipation. She was ready, desperate; she had counted the cost and chosen her course. If the call would only come while she retained her courage.

She wondered where Bob Meager was, and what he was doing. There was no movement about the house, except that of the cook in the detached kitchen. A light burned there and she had glimpses of him occasionally, bustling about. The fellow's regular work would have been completed long ago; no doubt he was busily preparing some sort of feast with which to celebrate the wedding. The wedding! Her wedding! There was the harsh mockery of laughter in her voice as she repeated over aloud the ironic words. *Her wedding!* Girl-like she had wondered often what it would be like. And now it was here; she was actually waiting the hour,

the moment. And the husband; the man whom Fate, or the devil, had brought to her? He was waiting, too, no doubt, alone in the front room yonder, drinking himself into a reckless courage, becoming a greater demon with every moment of delay. It was too much, too much. The very heart seemed to go out of her, and she buried her face in her arms on the sill, her body shaking with the sobs which could be no longer restrained.

She was lying there still, the starlight on her ruffled hair and one upturned cheek, but her mood had changed to that of wild, passionate despair. Tears no longer dimmed her eyes that were staring out blankly into the night. Suddenly her ears caught the distant sound of horses' hoofs through the silence, and she sat up, gasping for breath, once more clutched by fear. Yes, they were actually coming, the end was already at hand; he had not lied to her, not merely threatened—he was really brute enough to carry out the mad scheme. She was upon her feet, standing, motionless and rigid, back beyond view, when the little party rode up to the main door of the ranchhouse, which opened at their approach, a startling beam of light flashing from within. She leaned forward, every nerve tense from excitement, to gain glimpse of the newcomers.

There were but three in the company, all men, and

they had ridden far. She could tell this even in that dim reflection, for their clothing was whitened with the dust of the desert, and their horses advanced wearily with drooping heads. Yet she could discern little more. Two of the faces she could not distinguish at all, one a rather trim figure, sitting his saddle like a cavalryman; the other a humping, decidedly ungainly fellow, topped with a broad Mexican sombrero which completely shaded his features. These two remained mounted, but the third man swung instantly down from the saddle, noisily greeting Meager as he stepped into the open doorway. He was a heavily built American, with coarse, bloated face, and wore a scraggly beard. When he spoke he croaked like a frog.

"Hullo, Bob!" he called out, waddling forward. "Well, I got here all right."

"So I see," with no special cordiality in the voice, which was hoarse from drink. "And you didn't come alone, Garrity; who the hell is with you?"

"Alone!" he sputtered out a laugh. "Did you think I'd ride across that damned desert at night alone? Not for all the money you got, Bob Meager. Arvan came along with me, an' out here at Silver Springs we run into another old pard o' yours, an' persuaded him to ride on along with us. Ain't that all right?"

"It depends! Damn you, Garrity, I told you this

was to be a private affair, didn't I? Who is the fellow?"

The judge chuckled, evidently amused at the drunken outburst.

"Got to be a modest violet, Bob?" he asked. "Say, when I git married the whole blame county is goin' to see it done. However, every guy to his taste, an' besides I ain't seen the woman yet. What was it you asked me?"

"Who was it you brought along from Silver Springs?"

"Frisco — don't that beat hell?"

"Frisco! Why, by God, I never supposed he dared show up this side the line." He stepped out eagerly, reeling a little from the liquor he carried, yet heading straight toward the taller figure in the dim light. The latter swung down from the saddle and met him, Meager, garrulous with drink, greeting him effusively.

"Say, I'm glad to see you, Kid," he burst forth, "but how the hell do you dare come here? There is a lot o' guys who'd kill their own mother fer the reward Arizona's got on you. Tryin' to commit suicide?"

"No, not as desperate as that, Bob," answered the other, his voice rather low and musical. "I knew what I was doing all right, and these fellows didn't catch me asleep out at Silver Springs. I knew who they were before I joined up with them. Fact is, Bob, I was

headed this way and willin' to have company of the right sort."

"Headed this way? Huntin' me, you mean? What's up?"

"Nothing to worry about tonight. What I came for will wait. Safe for me here, isn't it?"

"Sure," and Meager burst into a drunken laugh. "I've cleaned out the old outfit complete. There ain't a damn Yankee here any more; all Mexicans I picked myself. Come on in, all of you, an' let's have a drink. Hey there, Sanchez," and his voice roared out the order to the bunkhouse. "Take care of these horses."

One by one the dark shadows of the men disappeared within, Meager bringing up the rear and closing the door behind him. Deborah, her heart beating wildly, sank down upon a chair, with face buried in her hands. They had come, and there was no hope in them. The judge, the half-breed, were mere puppets, dancing to the voice of their master; the very tone in which he greeted them spoke his contempt of the fellows. Any appeal for mercy to such as they would be but wasted breath. And the third man! The girl had somehow, at first view, hope of him. His trim appearance in the dim light, the pleasant, firm sound of his voice, her knowledge that he was not part of the original conspiracy, had given her a sudden thrill of expectation.

But this existed no longer since she heard his name. The "Frisco Kid;" the very sound of it served to chill her blood. Outlaw, desperado, spoken of in whispers along the border; tales of him had reached her ears ever since her first arrival. The troop of cavalry that had made camp at the ranch had been on his trail, and the officer in command had repeated to her the fellow's wild exploits until they mingled with her dreams. The "Frisco Kid;" and he was here again, suddenly appearing out of the desert, a friend of Bob Meager's, either hiding from pursuit or planning some fresh deviltry. There was no hope for her in his presence.

Someone rapped gently on the door, and she sprang to her feet and stood motionless, staring through the darkness. The rapping came again.

CHAPTER V

THE MARRIAGE

DEBORAH stepped forward silently, her lips pressed tight, opened the bureau drawer, straightening up once more with the heavy .44 gripped in her hand. The time had come, and she suddenly felt calm and cold.

"Who is there?"

"It's just me, Miss Meredith," answered a woman's voice weakly. "I've got one of my spells again. I—I need you bad. I just thought I couldn't drag myself this far; only I had to."

The reaction left the startled girl trembling, but she had no doubt as to the urgency of the call. Thrusting the revolver hastily back into its hiding place, unwilling that Mrs. Meager should even see it, she swiftly unlocked the door and stepped forth into the dimly lit hall. Her eyes caught one glimpse of her patient's face, ghastly white, but with terror rather than pain, and as quickly realized that she had walked into a set trap. Before she could even spring backward, a burly form crowded past her into the opening, completely blocking it, while directly fronting her, grinning maliciously,

stood Juan Sanchez. She knew, without seeing, who was behind her—Bob Meager, chuckling in drunken satisfaction. It was the shrinking, frightened woman against the opposite wall who spoke first.

"I—I didn't want to do it," she screamed hysterically. "He—he made me; he—he said he'd kill me if I didn't. My God! what do these men want of you?"

"Shut up!" roared Meager angrily. "Run the old fool back into her room, Juan, and shut the door on her. Go on; I'll take care of the girl. Rather fooled you that time, I reckon, young lady."

She looked him coldly, contemptuously in the face, conscious of the struggle to remove the older woman.

"Don't try to remain, Mrs. Meager," she said quietly. "Go back to your room. I can take care of myself."

"But—but dearie, what is it they want to do with you?"

Deborah laughed bitterly, so desperate by then as to be reckless.

"Marry me to this drunken brute," she explained, "this delightful stepson of yours. Pleasant prospect, isn't it? It may be accomplished with the gang he's got; but I'll make him pay. There is nothing you can do to help me; so go on back to your room—please go!"

Sanchez, grinning still, as though he enjoyed the task, forced the helpless woman down the hall. She yielded weakly, apparently so overcome by events as to be devoid of strength for resistance. The man shoved her roughly into the room, closed and locked the door. Deborah heard her fall on the floor within, but her eyes were upon the threatening face of Bob Meager.

"Well?" she said sharply, "you seem to have won the first round?"

"You bet I have. There wasn't no need breaking in, while there was an easier way. So you ain't going to make no row?"

"I have not said what I mean to do."

"An' I don't give a damn," roughly. "Only I'd like to know whether you're going along by yourself, or whether we got to drag you? It's one or the other of them two things."

"Along where?"

"To the living-room, of course. That's where I aim to have the ceremony pulled off."

The girl thought quickly. Resistance there and then was absolutely useless. Both men were armed, and one of them, at least, was crazy drunk. Neither would hesitate at any rudeness or insult; a struggle, a defiance, would mean both. They had gone too far by now to

hesitate or fail to exercise their power. It would be better to appear to yield, to seem reconciled to the inevitable. She was weaponless, unable to put up any defense; perhaps in the larger room some better opportunity for action might present itself. If she lulled their suspicions, led them to believe that she was conquered, she might be able to snatch a revolver from some holster, or even evade them and rush back to the safety of her own room. It was a grim, ghastly chance, but she could think of none better.

"I prefer going there by myself," she said, wondering at the steadiness of her voice, watchful of the expression on Meager's leering face. "No! don't touch me; don't dare to touch me."

The fellow laughed, but there was a snarl in his tone. "All right; so the cat has still got claws, has she? Well, I guess I can wait putting hands on you; it won't be for long. Go on ahead then. Come along, Sanchez."

In spite of her trembling limbs the girl walked firmly, never so much as turning her head to glance at the two behind her. She must act her part, play her character, permit them to think her indifferent to results, yet in no way afraid. Without a question she opened the door herself at the end of the narrow hall, and stepped into the room beyond. It was all familiar to her, extending the full width of the home, low-ceilinged, the heavy

beams supporting the upper floor blackened with smoke. A woven rug of rags partially covered the floor; the furniture was heavy, old-fashioned, many pieces rudely made. The narrow windows contained small panes of glass, the outer door was closed, and a clock ticked away on a cupboard in one corner. The only light came from a hand-lamp standing on a small table pushed back against the wall. She saw all this with her first rapid glance. There were two men in the room, the short, thick Mexican called Arvan, sprawling on a settee, and the judge, sunk into the easy chair, where old Tom Meager had sat for so many years, calmly smoking a pipe. At their entrance the fellow got upon his feet and bowed, the pipe still in his hands. Deborah looked anxiously about for the other—the “Frisco Kid”—but he was not in the room. Then, ignoring the hand Garrity held out, her eyes fastened upon the face before her. She never before had seen a countenance more repulsive or so deeply marked by dissipation, and her heart seemed to choke her before the sudden stare of those pig eyes and the bestial grin of the thick lips.

“You—you are the justice from Nogales?” she asked doubtfully.

“That’s what I am; Judge Cornelius Garrity, ma’am, at your service.”

"And you were asked to come out here to marry me to Bob Meager?"

"Maybe so, if you are the gurl."

"I am Deborah Meredith."

"Begorry now, I had forgotten the name entirely. But you are the one, no doubt. A fine husband ye'll be getting. Bob and I have been friends many a year."

"I judge so; the natural tie between you is quite apparent. I want to appeal to you, Judge Garrity, as an officer of the law, to refuse to perform this marriage—"

"Refuse! I refuse Bob? Why, it's all straight enough; I've got the license here all made out regular with your names on it."

"That is just the point. That license was procured without my consent, or knowledge. I repudiate it; I refuse to assent to it in any way. I have never agreed to marry Bob Meager. I am here now under threat, and I appeal to you for protection."

"My dear young woman," he began hoarsely, "I was told before coming here that you were somewhat temperamental, and might therefore desire not to proceed with the ceremony. I shall not be swayed in any way by such tantrums. My own duty is plain; the papers are in correct form; Mr. Meager assures me that he had your consent, and has acted in accordance

with your own wishes in the matter. It is too late at this hour to change your mind. I trust you will see the justice of this and make no further objections."

"Bob Meager told you that?"

"Certainly."

"He deliberately lied to you, then. I have never consented, and I never will. I despise and abominate the man—"

"But my young lady, my young lady, stop a moment and listen to reason."

"Oh, cut out the hot air, Garrity," broke in Meager, surging forward, unable to control himself any longer. "Let her rave if she wants to; it don't hurt none of us, I reckon. You came out here to do up this job for me, and the sooner it's over with the better. The law of Arizona don't say anything about whether the female consents or not, does it?"

"Well, not directly, Bob; that's implied, rather."

"Implied, hell! You go on and imply it then, pronto. I ain't organizing no debating society, you damn pot-bellied idiot. I'm here to marry this Deborah Meredith; that's what I'm paying you for; an' after that I'll attend to her tantrums myself."

"You mean to force me to marry you?" she asked, her own temper rising to combat his.

"Sure," he replied brutally. "I never supposed

you'd do anything else but kick. But that's none of Garrity's business."

"But such a marriage will not be legal; no court would ever sustain it."

He laughed coarsely, his eyes staring insultingly into her own.

"Legal! Courts! You make me tired. This ain't Chicago! We're out here in an Arizona desert, and I don't remember ever caring a damn what the law says since I was a kid. Here's my law, when it comes to that," and he suggestively slapped the gun holster on his hip, "an' there ain't nobody tells me what I shall do or what I shan't. You better get that first of all. Legal! Well, I reckon you heard what it was the judge said, didn't you? He's got the license there, and the authority. Here's two witnesses, according to law. Now what the hell you going to do? Suppose any court is going to take your word, unsupported, against the four of us? Besides," and he grinned suggestively, with a drunken leer, "after tonight, I don't reckon you'll be hunting the court anyway; you'll be damn glad you've got a husband. Come on up closer, boys, so you can see the whole show—Garrity is going to splice us now, without no more words about it."

The judge cleared his throat, taking a printed slip of paper from his pocket in his stubby fingers. However

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he may have regretted this job, his personal fear of Meager overcame all objections to performing it.

"Bob's quite right, miss," he said, with an effort at dignity. "He's sure got the law with him, an' the witnesses."

"But I refuse to marry him; I do not consent," she insisted, with trembling voice. "I have never told him I would."

"I ain't got nothing to do with your personal quarrels. They are for you and Bob to settle. I reckon every married couple has them. You just stand there an' face me."

She was pressed back against the table, helpless to move, too thoroughly bewildered and dazed for the moment to attempt any action. Sanchez had deserted the door he was guarding, and stood just behind her grinning cheerfully. Arvan was opposite, his dark, half-breed Indian face exhibiting no emotion, while Meager had planted himself at her right, his bloodshot eyes scowling into her own. She saw no chance to push away, no hope of protest; she could but struggle for breath, with limbs trembling beneath her. Garrity began to read, but she only heard him dumbly, her mind inactive, comprehending not a single word. Once Meager reached out and grasped her hand, but she jerked it free, with no other sense than her hatred of

his touch. The judge's voice droned on, what he said having no meaning to her. Then, suddenly, consciousness came back as though something had snapped in the numbed brain, the words sounding clear, distinct: "I pronounce you husband and wife, and whom God hath joined together, let no man put asunder."

With a single sharp cry, she sprang wildly backward, jerked herself free from Sanchez' hasty grip, and dashed headlong for the door leading into the hall. She had no plan, no thought-out scheme of escape, only instinctively headed for the one unlocked passage leading from the room. The quick, unexpected movement gave her time. The startled Mexican and Meager, springing forward to intercept her flight, collided, cursing and striking at each other in that instant of confusion, while she flung open the door and swept out, untouched, into the hall. Her mind contained but one thought as she ran—her own room, the weapon in the bureau drawer. She could defend herself there; kill herself, kill him, if necessary! He should never touch her—never! She was free now, and would be helpless in his hands never again. She would die first, die gladly, but Bob Meager would never possess her alive. The drunken oaths behind spurred her on, strengthened her resolve. She ran, never glancing back, straight to the entrance sought, flung it open and sprang within,

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slamming the door shut behind her and feeling desperately for the key. It was not in the lock, nor could she find it lying on the dark floor beneath. Drunk as Meager was, he had thought of that; had seen to it that the way to her apartment would be left unguarded. The girl turned, her heart beating rapidly, and crossed to the bureau. Thank God! he had not discovered the gun, and she swung defiantly about, the weapon gripped in her hand.

CHAPTER VI

THE BLOW IN THE DARK

DEBORAH, the revolver held tightly in her fingers, moved silently back into the darkest corner of the room, and crouched there listening. She had no time to think or plan, no comprehension of anything other than a desperate determination to defend herself to the last extremity. If those men entered that door she meant to shoot, and shoot to kill. This one deadly purpose was all she was conscious of, or cared for.

Perhaps in some vague way, Meager may have realized her desperation. He knew nothing of her being armed, yet, even in his drunkenness, had learned something of her temper, and hesitated to face her immediately. Why should he run the risk? He already had attained his principal object; they were married, and he could wait until her anger subsided somewhat before asserting his legal rights. Meanwhile the boys were waiting for their drinks, and he felt more inclined to celebrate the victory along with them and let tomorrow take care of itself.

Some faint conception of this situation occurred to her, as she crouched there in the dark watchfully wait-

ing, yet remained undisturbed. The tension relaxed, and she felt again her womanly weakness, her questioning, and despair. She laid the revolver beside her on the floor and buckled the belt with its load of cartridges about her waist; then picked the weapon up once again and rested it on her knee. She was no longer crazed, but able to think clearly and decide what to attempt next.

The starlight filtering through the window gave her a dim vision of the interior. No one touched the door, but she could hear voices in the hall and knew some of the men had followed that far. What had halted them she could only guess at, for merely detached words reached her ears, mingled with oaths, and finally ending in loud laughter. Then they seemed to go away, for all became silent, and in the reaction the knowledge that she had been thus left alone, undisturbed, brought to the girl a strange sense of shame. Her cheeks were no longer white, but hot and glowing. Meager's action could mean but one thing—his utter confidence that she was already securely in his power. She could not escape, she would be waiting there for him when he was ready to possess her. Now he would go back, drink and carouse with his boon companions; what difference did an hour make; she was his wife; when he was drunk enough, reckless enough, he would come to claim her.

That was what he had boasted, no doubt, and his coarse joke had caused that outburst of laughter. The foul, brutal cur! Well, let him come; she would continue to wait, and he should have his welcome. His wife! She might be his widow before dawn.

She did not move for a long, long time; did not take her eyes from the closed door, or release her grip on the revolver. She felt cold, tireless, actuated only by a relentless hatred. She wished he would come so that it might be over with. But nothing happened, and, little by little, her mood changed. The strain began to tell, began to break down her resolution, left her doubtful and afraid. She ventured to open the door a slight crack and peep cautiously out into the hall; it was deserted, not even a guard had been stationed there, but the door at the farther end, leading into the living-room, had been left open, and she could hear the men in there making merry. It was a babel of voices at first; then someone began to sing a ribald song in English, and at the first line she drew back, shutting out the hateful sound with a feeling of supreme disgust.

Trembling from head to foot, she crossed to the window and looked out into the cool mists of the night. No guard had been posted here either. Evidently she had been left perfectly free to go or come as she pleased, yet she fully understood how limited that freedom was.

She might flee from the house, but that was all; the borders of the ranch were still her prison walls, the efficient guard those sand deserts stretching in every direction, trackless and impassable on foot, vast, waterless leagues, where she would perish miserably. A light still burned in the bunkhouse, but the building seemed deserted. Once two men passed down the hill, leaning heavily upon each other, staggering and singing, disappearing finally through the open door. She was still staring after them, when a sound from behind suddenly caused her to face about. A fumbling hand was lifting the iron latch; the door was being pressed open with an effort at silence. Motionless, breathless with apprehension, the girl watched the entering beam of light broaden until Bob Meager stood swaying in the doorway, clutching at the knob to steady himself. He did not see her at first, his bloodshot eyes blindly searching the apartment; then he must have perceived her outline against the window, for he lurched forward, giving vent to an exclamation of relief.

“Hell, so you are here, waiting for me? Damned if I didn’t think maybe you’d taken a chance outside. Too blame sensible, ain’t you? I thought likely you’d come to your senses if I left you here alone awhile. Going to be good to me now, you little cat? Say! what you got to say for yourself, anyhow?”

"Only this; don't you come another step toward me."

He burst into a gruff laugh, slapping his knee.

"The hell you say! Who do you think I am, anyhow? Some kid afraid of a woman? Say, listen, that's no way for a wife to welcome her husband. I got a right in here, and you bet I'm going to stay. Got an idea you can bluff me, I reckon. Well, I ain't that kind, an' you might as well learn it now as later. This is our wedding night and we've had a hell of a time celebrating it. The boys is all drunk, plum laid out; I'm the only sober guy left in the party, and so I come here to see you. Here's where I ought to be, ain't it? Say, why don't you say something? What you going to do?"

"I am going to kill you, Bob Meager," she said coldly, "unless you leave this room."

"Kill me! Why, you blame little fool, I could crush the life out o' you with one hand—see, just like that. And by God, I got the right if you get too gay. I'm your husband, ain't I? That's what the law says, and I'm going to be your husband, you can bet your life on that. Think you'll scare me, do you?" he burst into an ugly laugh. "Not this time, you won't." He turned and closed the door; then crossed the room toward her, reeling drunkenly, yet quite able to retain his feet. The starlight rendered his features visible. Her motionless silence caused him to pause.

"Pretty damn still, ain't you?" he exclaimed, peering at her suspiciously; "why don't you talk? When I speak to a woman I want her to say something."

"There is nothing more for me to say."

"Only that you're going to kill me if I touch you, hey? All right, then; here's your chance."

He took two steps toward her, his hands reaching out eagerly, his face thrust forward. Then he stopped suddenly, with startled eyes staring into the leveled muzzle of the .44, his lips giving suppressed utterance to a swift ejaculation.

"I'll be damned!"

"Put your hands up, Bob Meager!" the words were icy cold. "Up, I say! Don't fool with me now. Turn around and go out that door. I am not playing; this means your life or mine. Go!"

"But say, wait—listen to me."

"Not to another word. This is my game. You thought you were coming here to bully a helpless girl. You were so sure of your brute strength you even took off your gun and left it behind. You are not sneering about my killing you now. God knows why I don't, you drunken cur; but there is only one thing that will save you—get out that door, and stay out."

He cringed back, cowardly, yet with drunken cunning. Desperate as she was, there was hesitation in the

girl's action. Dimly he grasped the truth that she shrank from the necessity of shooting; that she would actually pull the trigger only as a last resort. He took the chance.

"Sure," he muttered, "you got the drop and I cave. So long, honey."

He half turned away, reeling drunkenly, then suddenly, unexpectedly, flung his body directly at her, crushing her back against the wall, both falling together, the weapon undischarged beneath her body. Swift, surprising as the assault was, she had yet escaped the grip of his hands, and was on her knees again before he could move. The revolver was her only weapon, but in the fall she had lost grip of the stock. It lay there glittering in the starlight, and desperate, maddened by the danger, obeying the first wild instinct of the instant, she snatched it up by the barrel and struck with all her force at the man's head. The fellow gave utterance to no moan, his limbs twitched, and then he lay motionless, his face against the floor.

Deborah slowly lifted her body, shrinking back from the darkly outlined form, beginning to comprehend with horror what she had done. She still held tight to the weapon with which she had dealt the blow, although realizing that she no longer required its protection; The silence was terrifying; her nerves tingled painfully,

she found difficulty in breathing. Was the man dead? Had she actually killed him with that one hasty blow? She could scarcely realize the possibility, and yet she had struck with all her force, driven to it by terror uncontrollable. She shrank now from even touching him; nurse as she was, having witnessed death in every form of horror, and ministered to wounds of every degree, she would not place hand on this man, whether he lived or died. Her repugnance to him had become an obsession; she felt no desire to save him if she might. He represented to her mind all that was base and evil; she was glad she had struck him down.

But what now? This question overshadowed all else. The thing she had been imagining for so long had at last come to pass. He had come to her, come claiming her with insult and outrage, and she had actually dealt the blow of which she had dreamed. Her courage had not failed her, and he was lying there now in the darkness at her feet, sorely wounded, perhaps dead. It was her act, she had done it—what now? She had never faced this situation before, the aftermath. She had only planned out her course of action up to this point, giving no heed to what must naturally follow. Now it fronted her in sudden, grim, gripping terror. Whether Meager was dead or alive, she must get away. Better to face any danger of the

great desert than remain where she was, with not a friend to counsel or protect her, not a white man to whom she could appeal. And, if she did go, her escape must be accomplished at once; every instant of delay only increased the peril. There must be hours of darkness yet; those who would stop her, who would follow on her trail, were in drunken stupor, either in the living-room, or the bunkhouse. At present, at least, the way must be clear.

The girl thrust the revolver back into its holster at her waist, and glanced out through the window into the quiet night. The decision to act had left its impress upon her; she was no longer trembling with fear, doubtful as to her best course. Of two evils, the desert, or these lawless men, she chose the less cruel, the desert. If she was to die, it would be, at least, in honor. Once decided, her mind worked rapidly. In all probability not a man remained sober about the home ranch; if any horses had been left in the stable, she therefore ought to get several hours the start of a pursuing party. She believed Meager was dead, and, if so, his followers would be slow to discover what had happened, and would possess no leadership. This, inevitably would mean delay. While, even if the fellow should live, hours surely must elapse before he could take the trail. With a good horse under her, she would be beyond

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sight out on the desert, riding straight for those two peaks that old Tom Meager had pointed out to her as marking the Nogales trail. With such a start in the race there was surely a chance to win. Her pulses throbbed exultantly at this sudden awakening of hope, and, without so much as another glance at the body prostrate on the floor, she hurried to carry out her plans.

CHAPTER VII

THE MAN IN THE DARK

A N UNRECOGNIZED Mexican lay in drunken slumber, curled up like a dog, on the floor of the passage, but she found no difficulty in passing the fellow. She neither heard nor saw any of the others, as she made her way through the rear door, and across the few feet of open space dividing the main house from the detached kitchen. There was a lamp burning in the latter, and the remains of fire in the stove, but no occupant. Undoubtedly the cook had indulged also, and was now slumbering with the rest in some dark corner. Deborah knew the place well, and lost no time in gathering together what food she required, fortunate enough to discover a small sack in which it could be conveniently transported.

The effort had proven easy and safe so far, and her heart beat hopefully, as she emerged from the kitchen, thus equipped. Now if she could only procure a horse, escape actually appeared possible. In the dim radiance of the stars, she could trace the dark outlines of the stables down the steep grade, a hundred yards, or more, beyond the bunkhouse. Doubtless the ranch horses had

all been turned loose into the large corral. She had no means of catching these half-broken animals, but it might be that the horses ridden by the party arriving during the evening, had been put in the stable, ready for immediate use. These were weary enough from their desert trip when they arrived, but that was hours ago; they must have been fed and watered since, and, with the rest, would be fairly fit by this time for another journey. They were wiry broncos, able to endure any amount of hardship. It was then she remembered the horse the "Frisco Kid" had been riding. Even in the darkness she had marked the fine, blooded lines of the animal, the far better condition in which he appeared to be. The animal had lifted his head when the light from the open door streamed forth, and pawed impatiently, with his front hoofs. If she could only lay hands on him.

"Frisco Kid!" What had ever become of the fellow? She wondered as she slowly made her way down the slope, keeping, as far from the bunkhouse as possible. She had neither seen nor heard of him since that first meeting with Meager. He had simply dropped out of sight, disappeared completely. Perhaps he was among those drunken dogs in the living-room, sleeping off their carousal; yet somehow she did not believe it. Someway his voice and manner had strangely impressed

her as different; he did not belong with that crew. Outlaw, desperado, she knew him to be, a man with a price on his head, yet surely he was no drunken, roystering brute. He had not even gone into the house; she was sure of that now, remembering clearly. He had led the horses away, while the other two entered with Meager. Nor had he returned later; not at least while she was at the window, and he was not in attendance at the wedding.

Then the truth suddenly occurred to her—the man was hiding out. He dare not risk drinking, or being shut up in a house. He was a hunted creature, watchful of treachery in every human being. He could trust no one, not even his companions in crime; there was a reward for him, dead or alive. He would be out yonder in the dark somewhere, alone, he and his horse, wakening at the slightest sound. Perhaps he would be the one she needed to fear the most, when the pursuit started. These thoughts flashed swiftly through her mind, almost unconsciously, as she stole forward silently through the shadows. She passed a figure lying in the trail, too drunk to even reach the bunkhouse, but as she crept past the open door of the latter saw no signs of any occupants within. They were there, no doubt, a good dozen of them, but lying helplessly in their bunks with no present interest in what

might be happening about them. Except for the few line-riders, and that outlaw hiding in some thicket of chaparral, the whole personnel of the ranch were stupefied with liquor, indifferent to any occurrence going on about them.

A bit reckless now, because of this knowledge, the girl ventured through the great open door of the stable, and began groping her way forward searching the stalls. It was intensely dark inside, but the place was familiar enough. There were ten stalls, but seldom did these contain anything other than work horses; the riding ponies were almost invariably turned loose in the corral. She could only hope there might be an exception to this general rule on this particular night—at least that the Nogales animals might have been stabled, rather than turned out to run free. She stole forward cautiously, hearing no sound to alarm her, the bag of food grasped in one hand, the other extended in an endeavor to touch familiar objects so as to guide her through the gloom.

The first stall was empty, and, as she started to advance toward the second, she came to a sudden pause, with heart leaping into her throat—there had been a sound at her left, a rustling of straw, as though something had made a quick movement. She listened intently, drawing a breath of relief at the succeeding

silence. No doubt it was a horse stirring, or possibly a rat. Then a voice spoke sternly not three feet away.

"Put up your hands! Who are you? What are you doing in here?"

She obeyed instinctively, too frightened to even speak, dropping the bag to the floor, forgetting completely the revolver buckled about her waist.

A hand reached forward out of the darkness, and gripped her upraised arm; she was conscious of the close presence of a man, yet for the instant retained no power of movement.

"Why don't you speak?" said the same voice, impatiently, evidently angered at her silence. "What are you sneaking about in here for? Well, I'll be damned!" his tone changing, "if I don't believe it's a woman."

"It is a woman," she managed to reply falteringly. "But—but does that make any difference?"

He laughed, a certain relief evidenced in the sound, although he did not in any way relax his vigilance.

"Well, I confess it might," he admitted, "for you are a most unusual discovery in this section. I was looking for almost anything else. You belong with this outfit?"

"To the Meager ranch, you mean? Yes—that is, I have been employed here. You—you are not a Mexican, are you?"

"I should say not. I belong north of the line, if that's any relief to you. And what's more, if you want to be square with me, I'll play fair on my side. You believe that?"

"I shall have to; it wouldn't do me any good to lie."

"I reckon not; so let's get it over with; who are you?"

"Deborah Meredith," she explained, rather eagerly. "I—I am a professional nurse; my home is in Chicago. Tom Meager employed me to come out here and take care of his wife."

"Tom Meager; was that the name of Bob's father?"

"Yes; he was straight. I liked him; she was his second wife, not Bob's mother."

"Sure, I heard a little about that; Bob told me; he hated the woman."

"Are you a friend of Bob Meager's?"

The man chuckled, and she knew he had put away the weapon he had held in his hand.

"Well, he's got an idea that I am. We've run about together a bit, I admit; which confession maybe is no recommendation to you."

"No, it is not."

"I thought likely it wouldn't be. So you and Bob are not good friends?"

"I despise and hate the man; he is a drunken brute."

"Granted freely; but if you feel that way, why did you remain here on the ranch?"

"Because I have had no chance to get away since his father died. I could not desert my patient, and besides, had no reason to suppose Bob would come back and take possession. He was a fugitive from justice; his father had lost all faith in him, and—and I had reason to believe he had been shut out from all right to this property."

"You had reason to believe? What reason? I am not asking merely from curiosity; I want to understand the entire situation. Believe me, I would rather befriend you than him."

"Why do you say that? just to draw me on?"

"No; I am really interested. I already have an idea what this means; you are endeavoring to escape alone?"

"It seemed my only chance," she confessed, heartened by the man's words, and manner, and eagerly wishing she might see his face. "But I am talking with a stranger; perhaps I trust you too much."

"Is there anything else you can do?" he insisted. "I have it in my power to aid you, or prevent your escape. You must choose which it shall be."

She drew in her breath sharply, the full truth of what he said clear to her mind.

"What you say is true," she admitted frankly. "I

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must trust you blindly; I have no other choice. You are not employed here?"

"No, I just blew in last night."

"What is your name?"

"Daniel Kelleen."

"You are not a cow-puncher surely? You—you have education."

He laughed good-humoredly.

"Nevertheless, I am quite accustomed to cow-punching. Perhaps I've had a trifle more schooling than some of the boys. Still, if you accept me at all, it will have to be just as I am. Now let me have the straight of all this affair, and then we'll get busy. Tell it to me from the first."

Deborah stared at the man's dim outline through the darkness. If she could only see the expression of his face. And yet, as she had already acknowledged, there was no choice left her—she must trust him blindly, absolutely; he could defend, or betray her at his own will. So clear was this situation she scarcely hesitated.

"Yes, I will tell you, Daniel Kelleen," she said gravely. "I must trust someone, and you seem to be the one sent. All I know of you is, that you are an American. I am an American also, and a woman. If that does not appeal to you, then nothing else will. I

have told you already who I am, and how I came here. The remainder of the story is brief. I have had nothing to do with Bob Meager since he returned, immediately after his father's sudden death. There was no opportunity for me to leave the ranch, so I remained in care of Mrs. Meager. Until last evening I never even encountered Bob but once. Then he came unexpectedly into his stepmother's room, and we met briefly. I thought nothing of this meeting at the time, except that his actions and words intensified my dislike of the man. He was brutal and insulting to us both. After that I kept out of his way, and he apparently ignored my presence entirely. I did notice, however, that he was getting rid of all the old employees on the ranch, and replacing them with Mexicans. Evidently he wanted no Americans about him."

"I understand; not his kind."

"So I thought, but with no conception that this change had any reference to me."

"It did have, then?"

"So it seems now. He came upon me suddenly alone last evening. I was at the edge of the plateau, close to the Nogales trail, watching the sunset over the desert, and saw nothing of him until he stood beside me. There was no chance for me to get away, and I had to listen to what he said." She dropped her face

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into her hands, but instantly lifted it again, and went on, her voice strengthening with indignation. Kelleen made no movement.

"He—he was not even decent about what he had to say. I was merely a chattel he had to deal with, a slave to use as he pleased. It doesn't sound true, but it is true, every word."

"Go on," said the other dispassionately. "I know Bob Meager."

"He said he was going to marry me; he didn't ask me about it at all; just stated it as a fact. Said he'd made up his mind the first time he saw me, and had been getting things ready ever since. When I tried to object, the brute just laughed, and asked how I was going to help myself. He made me realize the situation I was in, without an American left on the ranch, and those miles of desert stretching away on every side. He—he frightened me terribly, and he gave me no time to think, or plan an escape. To appeal to him was utterly useless."

"I should say it would be."

"Then he told me everything was arranged for this very night. A—a man was coming out from Nogales to marry us. He said I better go into the house, and get ready. Then he laughed again, and went away. He—he wasn't afraid to leave me there alone, for

there was no place where I could hide, no chance to leave the ranch. I—I was hardly sane, but—but after awhile I went back to the house; what else was there I could do?"

"Nothing, I reckon, unless you killed the cuss. What did you do?"

"I—I made up my mind to do even that," she confessed. "I stole a revolver from the bunkhouse while the men were at mess, and then locked myself in my own room to wait. I thought perhaps he was lying; but he wasn't. Along about nine o'clock the outfit rode in from Nogales. There was nothing for me to do but wait desperately. I meant to stay there, and defend myself, behind that locked door. But that devil tricked me. He got Mrs. Meager to call to me from the hall, saying she had one of her bad turns, and I opened the door to help her. I—I hardly know what happened after that. I tried to explain to the man who came to marry us, but he wouldn't listen. He was just a creature Bob Meager had picked up to serve him."

"Sure! I know him—Garrity; he'd murder his mother for a drink of booze."

"But is he really a judge?"

"He's a justice of the peace down at Nogales."

"Then I was really married? It—it was legal?"

"Darn if I know about that. I think likely the whole

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outfit would swear you consented. Who were in the gang?"

"Juan Sanchez, a ranch foreman, and a black-faced fellow who came out from Nogales."

"Arvan; they'd swear anything Bob told them to. They'd make it out you were married all right."

"But—but I'm not; not now!"

"Not now? What do you mean?"

"I've—I've killed him!"

CHAPTER VIII

A NEW ALLIANCE

FOR a moment Kelleen did not move; then impulsively he groped for her hand in the darkness.

"You killed him? You did? Say, I like you," he exclaimed earnestly. "You are sure some girl, you are. But are you certain you killed him?"

"I—I think so—yes," she stammered, totally surprised by the way in which he greeted her news. "But I—I am not exactly sure."

"You are a nurse, you said?"

"Yes, but—but somehow I couldn't touch the man. He was so repulsive to me—I couldn't. All I know is he is lying there on the floor of my room, and—and he never moved after he was struck."

"Struck? You did not shoot, then?"

"No; I had no chance. I got away from them, and ran to my own room, where I meant to lock myself in, but someone had taken the key. I shut the door behind me and got the revolver out of a drawer, determined to defend myself. The men followed, but stopped outside in the hall. I could hear them laugh and talk; then they went back to the front room again. Bob

was so sure I couldn't get away, he wasn't afraid to leave me there. He planned to get drunk first, and then come back."

"Sure; that would be his style; and you waited? You didn't try to get away?"

"Get away! Where could I go? Only out into the desert, and those men would have trailed me if I tried that. Yes, I waited in the dark, desperate, determined to kill him when he came. And he came finally, so drunk he could hardly stand, but ugly with the liquor. He had outrrank all the others and boasted of it, and—and then he came reeling to me. I—I do not seem to remember exactly what did happen; he laughed and jeered at me, and got hold of the weapon before I had courage to fire. Then we struggled, and the grip of his hands drove me mad. The revolver fell to the floor, but I got it, and struck at him with all my might. That was all; he just lay there, and never moved; I could see his face in the starlight, but—but I couldn't make myself touch him. I—I believed he was dead, that I had killed him."

"Never mind, little girl," interrupted Kelleen firmly, "maybe he was, but I doubt it; guys like that are not croaked so easy. Then, I take it, you ran away."

"Yes; I—I couldn't stay there, and I thought perhaps, there might be a chance, if I could only find a

horse somewhere. I knew the others were all drunk, and I would not be missed before morning. I had to try, and that was how I came to be here. You—you understand now?"

"Yes, I understand, and I am going to stay with you. But first, let's get this straight. I am not bragging about myself, and, I reckon, ordinarily, you wouldn't be pickin' me out for a companion, but right now, it's any port in a storm. One thing's sure, I don't belong to Bob Meager's outfit, and I like you. The main question is, are you ready to trust me as a white man?"

"Yes—I am."

"That means a lot more than you think right now," he went on, but evidently encouraged by her tone. "Because it ain't going to be so easy getting away. I know this country off the main trails. I don't take any stock in Bob's being dead; he's got a knockout, that's all, and when he comes to himself again, he's going to be raving. He'll have every rider on this ranch on our trail, and the best we can reckon on is maybe three hours start. You got to stay with me, and do just what I say—and, girl, that sure means you must trust me plumb to the limit. Do you sabe that? This ain't going to be no canter between here and Nogales; the only chance we've got is to hide out, first in the desert, and

then in the hills. I'm telling it to you rough; but you better know it now than later."

"You mean we shall have to be alone together for—for some time?"

"That's the stuff. We ain't going to have an easy gallop into town. You don't know me from Adam, and if you did, I reckon you wouldn't go a mile with me. I ain't very highly thought of along this border, I'll say that; there ain't many would choose me fer a partner, that's a fact. More, I ain't got nothing to say to you except that I'm going to play square. If you trust me I'll bring you through safe enough in one way or another; but if you don't feel that you can go the limit, then the best thing for you to do, maybe, is to stay here, and scrap it out with Bob Meager. My notion is this running away with his wife ain't going to be no snap even for me, and darned if I'm going to tackle the job except you're of a mind to go clear through with me."

"You think I am his wife, then? that he is really alive?"

"I havn't a doubt of it. At least I am going to proceed on that theory. Meager is the one we have got to escape from; if he recovers by daylight from that rap you gave him, he is going to lead us a merry chase. Every minute of a start we get, the better. But I want

you to get it straight—will you go with me?"

There was an eager earnestness in his voice of which she was fully conscious, yet somehow this did not frighten her. The one vision of Bob Meager, drunk and grasping her in his arms, dominated all else, and left her careless of any lesser danger. There was no hope in remaining where she was, alone, in the power of this outfit; any effort at escape, no matter how desperate, was infinitely better than a weak surrender to such a fate. Kelleen was white, an American, a border desperado, no doubt, yet he talked square, and had given her pledge of protection. He offered her the only available chance; she must trust the man blindly, or else resign herself to fate. No other choice remained. Impulsively she thrust out her hand in silent promise.

"You mean yes?"

"I mean yes. I trust you fully, absolutely. I will do exactly as you say."

"It is bound to be some test, young lady," he returned gravely, releasing her hand, and rising to his feet, "but I reckon I won't let you regret it. Nobody ever trusted Dan Kelleen yet and found him a piker. We're pardners now; let's go."

He picked up a saddle from the bed of hay on which he had been resting; found another hanging on a stake

driven into a beam, and with both flung carelessly over his shoulder, emerged through the open door into the starlight. Deborah followed closely, a new feeling of relief giving lightness to her step. She was no longer alone, unguided; something about the words and actions of the man brought confidence. She had not even seen his face, yet his very presence inspired courage; she had found a friend, a companion. His movements added to her faith. The situation was plainly no novelty to him; he had been a fugitive before and had learned every trick in the hard school of experience. A moment he paused motionless in the shadow of the stable, studying the dimly revealed scene. There was no movement visible anywhere, although a light burned in the bunkhouse, and the faint glimmer of another appeared through the window of the more distant ranchhouse. These meant nothing but as reminders of the night's orgy, convincing, indeed, that the revelers were still soundly asleep as a result of their debauch. Whatever had happened to Bob Meager, it was clearly evident the fellow had not yet recovered consciousness, and it was hardly likely his fellows would become aroused until he sounded the alarm. The way of escape still remained open, but no one could tell for how long. Success might hang upon moments. Kelleen's keen eyes searched the deep shadows anxiously,

but his lips smiled in satisfaction.

"It's all right," he whispered confidently. "The gang is still doped, I reckon. You don't see anyone moving, do you?"

"No."

"Then follow me." He stopped suddenly. "You ride, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Good! It struck me maybe you didn't, being a nurse from the East. Learn how out here?"

"Not entirely; I have always ridden, but old Tom Meager taught me a lot."

"Well, it's going to come handy now. My horse is all right, but I'll have to rope one for you, and I might pick a wild devil in the dark. Could you stay?"

"As long as he keeps his feet."

"Damn, but I like your style!" he said enthusiastically, letting his hand rest an instant on her shoulder. "You and I are going to hit it off fine. Come on, now; keep back in the shadow."

She waited at the bars of the corral while Kelleen vanished in the darkness of the open, lightly swinging a coiled lariat in his hand. It was a wonderful night, the stars like lamps in the sky, the silence profound. The air blew cold against her cheek, but not so much

as the rustle of a leaf broke the stillness. Both houses were from there hidden from view, and, now that her newly found companion had disappeared, Deborah felt entirely alone. Had she done right to repose trust in him? Who was the man? In his presence, hearing his voice, mysteriously influenced by his careless personality, she felt strangely drawn toward him, but now, that he had vanished, doubts came surging back. Why was he at the ranch if he had no connection with Bob Meager? What would his presence there imply? The ranch was on no commonly used trail; visitors never came without a purpose. To reach there at all required miles of desert travel, with no little hardship. There must always be an object in such a journey. What could it be in this case? Was the fellow a mere drifter, seeking a job? A fugitive from justice, hiding from the law? or actually in Meager's service? Surely he must be one of the three; nothing else would account for his presence under such circumstances — his hiding out in the stable, his secrecy, even the disparaging remarks he had made about himself.

Yet she liked, and trusted him; felt no fear of the man. So far as his relations with her were concerned not a doubt of his absolute squareness assailed her. She believed his promise. Outlaw, fugitive, border desperado, he had won her faith already. The reac-

tion she experienced from being helplessly alone caused her now to rest all hope on this stranger who had so mysteriously come to her rescue; she cared not who he might be, or from whence he came. Enough that he was there, strong-armed, capable, fearless, willing to befriend her, to guide her safely. This very relief felt, left her helpless to question his motive; she was ready enough to follow him, to do whatever he desired. It was this spirit of almost blind confidence that the girl welcomed his return when he finally emerged from out the black shadows, leading two horses trailing quietly behind, through the corral gate. She could not even wholly refrain from showing her eagerness.

"Let me aid now," she insisted. "I am not quite helpless; indeed I am not."

He laughed softly, his eyes searching the shadows, rather than seeking her.

"No, no; the quickest way will be for you to stand quietly, and hold the brutes; this animal seems a bit ugly. I'll try him out myself."

He saddled and bridled the two rapidly, evidently accustomed to working in the dark.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"Put your foot in my hand. This is my horse; he'll carry you fine. Now, up you go. This your water

bottle? I'll strap it to the pommel where it will be handy."

He swung into the saddle himself, restraining the half-broken animal with an iron hand.

"You know the way down the mesa?" he asked, "the Nogales trail?"

"Of course."

"Then ride ahead, and I'll follow. I may have trouble with this brute before he learns who is master. Just go straight on out into the desert. I'll not be far away."

She rode forward, never questioning his right to command. It seemed the most natural thing in the world to obey. The horse under her moved steadily at a swift walk, alert but well trained, obedient to the slightest pressure of her fingers on the rein. The muffled sounds of a struggle reached her ears, and she turned in the saddle to look back, but darkness hid everything. The man would conquer, and keep his word, and she guided her mount into the narrow trail, scarcely discernible beneath the tree shadows. Her courage was high; she was no longer alone; the dread of the desert had left her.

CHAPTER IX

THE ROAD TO SILVER SPRINGS

DEBORAH found passage down the steep hillside and had advanced some distance across the level, before Kelleen joined her. No words were exchanged between them as he reined in his horse beside her own. Evidently the man was satisfied with her knowledge of the trail as well as the progress made. He turned in the saddle, gazing searchingly back at the dim outline of the mesa, now barely visible through the gloom. His horse, completely conquered, had lost all restlessness, keeping even pace with the one ridden by the girl. She glanced aside uneasily.

"There is something wrong?" she asked, troubled by his silence.

"No, nothing stirring. I circled the bunkhouse before leaving; the whole outfit is still asleep. I was just getting directions fixed in my mind. We are going a route I haven't traveled lately."

"But the Nogales trail is not difficult to follow."

"That is exactly what is wrong with it," he explained, his face now turned forward. "It is so easily followed, we could never get far enough ahead of pursuit to be

safe. They will jump to the conclusion that you have gone this way, of course. I am hoping they will believe you have gone alone."

"Do they know you were at the ranch?"

"Yes, unfortunately; but my disappearance during the night will not necessarily make them conclude we have disappeared together." He laughed. "I haven't a reputation for remaining very long in any one place, so my going will create no particular suspicion. Then I've covered things the best I could. I came out through a ravine to the north, and circled back to this trail, and from here on not much trace will be left—the way that wind is blowing it would take an Apache to follow us after two hours. That is what I'm counting on now—to leave those fellows guessing. They'll be sure you've gone this way—because it's the only trail you knew anything about—but they won't have the ghost of an idea what has become of me. That is exactly what I'm aiming to do—get the bunch riding this trail, thinking you're going it blind, and that all they've got to do in order to catch you is to ride hard enough. Then they won't stop to read 'Sign'—see?" He chuckled at the picture, and rested one hand lightly on her saddle pommel. "I've done a bit of hiding out before, and reckon I know the game."

"But—but I do not," she ventured doubtfully. "It

seems to me we are doing exactly what they expect us to do."

"Sure; I'm counting on two hours and a half, or maybe three hours of darkness yet. An hour will bring us to Silver Springs. That doesn't mean a thing to you, does it?"

"No, only I think I remember the place."

"And it won't to those guys, either, unless Bob Meager is able to be along with them. The gang he has is new to these parts; most of them come from over the border. Well, Silver Springs is where we take a side trip, the sort not many know about. Two hours' ride from there the whole United States couldn't find where you was hid away."

"How did you know?" she questioned suspiciously.

"Oh, it's part of my trade to learn the country I'm working in."

"Your trade?"

"Sure; you never supposed I was here for my health, did you? I've got a trade all right, and perhaps I'll tell you about it sometime. It's enough now for me to say that it has taught me as much about this desert as any Indian ever knew. I've rode it alone, east, west, north, and south, and one of the strange places I stumbled into—by good luck, not more than two days ago—was this Devil's Gulch I'm heading for now.

THE ROAD TO SILVER SPRINGS

If we get there by daylight we'll have this game blocked."

"You believe no one else knows the place?"

"Sure, someone does, but not this outfit. I doubt if old Tom Meager ever knew of it, but I have some reason to believe Bob may. It has been used before by white men, and cattle have been herded there. I saw enough to find that out, but none of the 'Sign' was recent. It has been a thieves' den in its day, no doubt, if the story was known."

"A thieves' den?"

"Likely—yes. You do not know this country very well, Miss Deborah, but it has been the headquarters for cattle rustlers and smugglers for years, centuries for all I know. In some respects it is as bad today as it ever was. Mexico is just over yonder," and he made an expressive gesture with one hand, "and this desert stretches along both sides the line; on every side mountains and wild country. There's nothing here to civilize, and the only law is represented by a few scattered soldier patrols. The Meager ranch is the only oasis in a hundred miles. I don't know how the place was ever found, but I'll bet it was held by the rifle."

"It was," she said eagerly. "Old Tom told me the story. He came in here a young man, prospecting, and

discovered these hundreds of acres, with water, grass, everything, even a considerable bunch of wild cattle. There was no one in the country then, and the cattle were not even worth stealing. He lived here alone for years, found gold somewhere, and got enough to develop this property. At first he did not know whether he was in Mexico or the United States, but at last secured title to the land, brought men in to help, and began to raise and ship stock. The Indians never troubled him much, but rustlers did, both Yank and Mexican. They had a regular trail through those hills to the east. It is used yet occasionally; I rode out there with Tom Meager once, and it is like a road — ”

“ Yes, I’ve seen it,” Kelleen interrupted, “ running through Glorieta Canyon. There’s another trail also down Box Creek.”

“ Thousands upon thousands of stolen cattle were driven along there north and south, and oftentimes they tried to pick up some of the Meager stock in passing. For years they were fighting almost all the time. Then soldiers came and patroled the border, and broke the trade up very largely.”

“ But not altogether ? ”

“ No ; there is still some cattle stealing, of course, but most of those fellows find it more profitable now to run arms, ammunition, and supplies across into Mexico.

There is a lot of that being done, I am told, but the men engaged do not bother the ranch much. Occasionally they kill a steer for meat, but it doesn't pay to run them off."

"You have a pretty clear idea of the situation, young lady!" the man said quietly. "There is just as much deviltry here as there ever was, but it has taken a new form. And another change is impending, unless I misinterpret the signs. Tom Meager ran this ranch straight and fought for his rights like a man. Everybody along the border knew that, and respected the old man. But this cub of his is another proposition. The whole border brood contains nothing worse than Bob Meager. He is low-down mean, and has been a thief, and an associate of thieves, all his life. It doesn't make any difference how I know all this—I do know it." There was a bitterness to Kelleen's voice which startled the girl.

"You hate him?"

He laughed lightly.

"Oh, no; I cannot afford to do that, but you have got me started, and I might as well finish up. I reckon you know the fellow fairly well yourself. I get him from another angle. It is not clear in my mind yet exactly how he got possession of this property. Of course, I know he is old Tom's son, and the natural

heir, but I met the father once or twice, and cannot believe he ever put the ranch unreservedly into Bob's hands, giving his widow nothing. I'd like to see that will, for I'll bet all I'm worth it's phony."

"He—he inherited by will, then? I never heard how he gained possession. He just came and took charge. Mrs. Meager was not even able to get away to consult a lawyer—if she had the courage."

"That is his claim. I heard about it in Nogales. Garrity drew the will, as I understand, and still holds it. The instrument is duly recorded, but the original remains safely in possession of the judge."

"Is that regular?"

"Perhaps so; not being a lawyer, I can only guess at the regularity. Of course it will have to be produced in court for final settlement of the estate; but I don't think they anticipate any serious questioning as to the validity of the document."

She stared aside at her companion through the darkness, suddenly surprised by the change in his language. The man quickly noticed her movement, and chuckled good-humoredly.

"Forgot myself, didn't I?" he asked carelessly, "and dropped back into real English. Made you want to question a bit? All right; go ahead."

"It—it is no business of mine," she faltered doubt-

fully, "but I had to wonder. I had not expected anything like that."

"Of a mere desert tramp, you mean. Well, all sorts of driftwood come to these shores. I make no claim, except to a reasonably good education. Just now it is of small value, however pleasant to possess. But let that slide; we were discussing Bob Meager, and not myself. The will will be probated without trouble, I reckon, as I have heard of no contest."

"Could it be contested?"

"The widow could claim her dower rights."

"But Mrs. Meager would not dare. She is helpless, and cannot even leave the ranch."

"So I gathered from others. There are no friends, then, to take her part?"

"Absolutely none. I doubt if she knows a soul in this country; she is an invalid, and in deadly fear of her stepson."

"And you have heard of no other will?"

"Not a word. Mr. Meager's death was very sudden, an accident. His wife's sickness prevented his confiding business matters to her, but I am sure she was very dear to him, and he would never have left her to suffer. He was a splendid man."

"I thought so myself. He was found dead on the trail, I heard?"

"Yes, his horse came home without him. There was an inquest, the evidence going to show that his horse stumbled and threw him; his head struck a rock, and was badly crushed."

"A skilled horseman, was he not?"

"Yes; but he might have been thrown, if the horse fell."

"Of course. May I ask if you saw the wound?"

"Yes; there was no doctor, so they made use of me. He was dead then; had been for some hours. The skull was crushed in, a jagged wound which might have been made by a sharp rock. I suspected nothing else at the time."

"Naturally not, and since then?"

"Nothing I can put in words," she confessed hesitatingly, "without a more careful examination."

"You testified at the inquest?"

"No; I was not called. A doctor was brought out from Nogales."

"Then probably you never saw the man who conducted that inquest."

"No; I remained with Mrs. Meager in her room. She was very much broken down. Who was he?"

"Judge Cornelius Garrity, who thus manages to become the central figure in the whole tragedy. This interested me from the first, and more than ever now

that I have met you. You see, I know Garrity, and there is not a wickeder old devil in Arizona. He never did a straight thing in his life."

"You—you mean there has been fraud? a forged will?"

"I am prepared to suspect almost anything with Bob Meager and Garrity as bed-mates," he asserted gravely. "They are capable. Bob is simply a brainless brute, but the other is another type, far more dangerous. Garrity has been a lawyer, a saloon-keeper, a gambler, and is now a justice of the peace. It is common talk that not a gun or cartridge crosses the border but what he gets something out of it."

"Why do you tell me all this?"

"'Tis odd, isn't it, the way I've got talking tonight," he admitted in surprise. "Usually I don't talk much, especially with strangers. The truth is, I suspect, I rather like you, and then we've got to be together for awhile. Somehow it seems natural to tell you these things. My notion is this, that Garrity fixed this whole matter up for a purpose. Maybe circumstances helped it along, and maybe they didn't. I ain't so sure myself that old Tom Meager died a natural death. Anyhow, everything was ready—the only known will locked in Garrity's safe, and Bob close enough at hand to take possession almost before his father's body was cold.

By the time the funeral was over he had discharged half the old men on the ranch, and brought in Mexicans to take their places. Since then all the old hands have gone—what does that mean?"

"I am sure I do not know."

"Well, I can guess, from my acquaintance with Bob and Garrity, and their associates. These fellows imported are no Mexican cowboys. That Juan Sanchez has a price on his head; the Indian, Pedro, is known as a cattle thief, and I doubt if there is a greaser in the bunch who hasn't a record somewhere below the line. I tell you, those birds have something up their sleeve beside cattle-raising; that's only a bluff. It is either gun-running, or whisky, or both. I heard whispers in Nogales ——"

"That was what brought you up here?"

"Well, no; only incidentally. But, good Lord, I never talked so much in my life before. What is that ahead? A pile of stones? Then we are at Silver Springs, and business is about to begin."

CHAPTER X

COVERING THE TRAIL

DEBORAH could perceive nothing, except the dimly visible heap of stones which Kelleen pointed out. All around stretched the black void of the desert, silent and full of mystery. The distant stars yielded a dim, spectral light, yet there was nothing the eye could rest upon amid the dead level of surrounding sand. The wind blew steadily, occasionally stinging her face with grit, and not a sound reached her ears. The silent loneliness closed about them like the walls of a room. The girl had remained almost unconscious of this intense barrenness as they had talked together, but now suddenly awakened to a sense of the desolate surroundings. She was alone with this man, fleeing for her life into unknown danger. However this realization shocked her, their arrival at the spot sought for only served to arouse her male companion to more energetic action. Whatever spirit had animated him during that hour's pleasant ride was as quickly forgotten, and the instinct of the plainsman instantly became dominant. As the horses came to a stop, he turned in the saddle,

peering back through the veil of darkness toward the Meager ranch.

"Everything seems all right so far," he commented quietly. "They are still drunk and asleep back there, I reckon. Now we've got to throw them off the trail."

"You are sure they will follow us?"

"Sure; there is nothing else to be expected. If Bob is killed there will be no doubt in their minds as to who did it, for the body will be in your room. Garrity will have every reason to run you down. So will Meager if he still lives. They don't dare to let you escape."

"But surely those men cannot fear me?"

"Nevertheless they will. Those birds are up to crime of some kind, and will suspect you know something. They do not want a word to leak out as to what is going on here."

"They will miss you also; someone must have known you were there."

"Of course; but they will not suspect me of any connivance with your escape. I cannot explain now, but those fellows consider me all right. I come and go as I please, and my absence will mean nothing to them. Garrity will believe you became desperate enough to try and get away alone. That is why they will start on this trail first of all, but they will have to follow

blind—at least I am aiming to leave very little for them to follow, beyond here."

He grasped her bridle rein, the two horses moving forward at a walk, circling to the left of the stone marker. Even in that dim starlight Deborah felt convinced they were still following the Nogales trail, which was rutted with wheel tracks. A hundred feet beyond, the faint sound of the horses' hoofs gave evidence that they passed along a narrow ridge of rock. Suddenly Kelleen came to a pause, leaning forward in the saddle to see more clearly.

"You have no memory of how things are here?" he asked.

"No; only that the springs are over to the left yonder."

"Then listen; there is an outer opening of rock which swerves here to the right, and runs almost directly east for two hundred yards. It is not wide, but I am sure you can trace it in the starlight—see; it runs there."

She looked eagerly where he pointed, and could dimly perceive the lighter surface outlined against the sand.

"Yes."

"Follow that alone carefully; go just as far as possible, and then wait there for me. There is no danger,

so you keep close to the rocks. Keep to the center so the horse will leave no imprint."

"And what are you going to do?"

"Ride straight ahead down the trail; then circle back through a gully, and meet you out yonder. Don't be afraid; just wait. I'll come, although it may require half an hour or more for me to make the trip safely; I've got to cover every trace after I once strike out into the desert."

She watched him ride away, vanishing quickly into the gloom, his horse's hoofs making no sound in the soft sand. Instantly she began urging her own mount along the narrow rock ridge, experiencing no difficulty, however, as the intelligent animal picked his path carefully, very much as though he had traveled that same route before. Growing confident, Deborah loosened her grip on the rein, permitting the horse cautiously to select his own way, watchful only that he did not stray from the narrow path of rock. Where this very plainly ended she drew the animal to a halt, and sat upright in the saddle, staring wonderingly about into the silent desolation. There was nothing either to see or hear; darkness shut down all about her, but for the soft glow of those wonderful stars overhead, dimly outlining the arc of the sky. This was not a dense, impenetrable darkness, but rather as though one peered into heavy

mist, through which near-by objects might be dimly perceived. But there were no objects visible—only a dead, motionless level of sand, across which the wind swept unchecked and noiseless, bearing with it the sand spray to lash her face as with so many sharp needles.

How unutterably barren and desolate it all was; even the points of compass were blotted out; she was alone and lost, except for that rock ridge along which they had found passage. In the somber silence her mind traveled back over all that had happened that night. She had no time before for thought; she had been continuously forced onward by circumstances beyond control, driven blindly. But now everything which had occurred so swiftly during those past few hours swept over her in memory like a flood. She had enjoyed no time, no opportunity for any choice; had simply been compelled to accept whatever came. What had this led her into? What was the end now before her? It all seemed more a horrible dream than any reality of life. It was beyond belief, beyond experience; that such things were even possible seemed utterly beyond reason.

Yet memory would not die, or be deceived. The very loneliness in which she sat, bowing helplessly before the sand storm, waiting, drove the whole truth home to her consciousness. It was true—all of it was

true. The death of old Tom Meager; the return of the renegade son; his brutal assumption of control; the glow of lust in his eyes at their first meeting; and then—then the happenings of this last night. Had she done right? She dare not even attempt to answer the question. She did not know; yet even then saw no other course she might have chosen. Indeed, she had been given no choice; fate had relentlessly thrust everything upon her. From the first threat uttered by Bob Meager to this very moment she had been but a chip tossed helplessly on the stream of events. And now—now she was there waiting, amid all this desolation, for the return of a strange man, whose face she never had seen. The whole situation seemed impossible, yet she could not doubt its actual reality. She was not dreaming; she was wide awake.

Yet as she reviewed all the events leading up to this situation the girl could not perceive where she might have done otherwise. The impossibility of leaving the ranch unaided; the openly avowed purpose of Bob Meager; the forced marriage; the drunken assault; the blind effort at escape, believing she had killed the man in self-defense; and the unexpected meeting with Kelleen—all these had been utterly beyond her control. Even after that scarcely a choice had been left her. The man had to be accepted as a friend, or else

left behind as an enemy. He was in position to either serve or betray her, as he chose, and there was that about his personality which had won her faith. What it was she hardly knew, nor did she have the slightest conception still who the man actually was. His evident dislike of Meager and Garrity meant nothing, except perhaps as thus explaining his willingness to befriend her against them. Even thieves fall out, and she could not conceive this fellow as anything but an outlaw. His very presence at the ranch presupposed this, while his attempt at concealment made it even more probable. Kelleen knew altogether too much to be entirely innocent; indeed had confessed enough already to cause Deborah to believe him a border outcast, involved in the same criminal scheme as these others with whom he evidently associated. He had never idly drifted to the Meager ranch, but had come there with definite purpose, seeking refuge, if nothing else.

However, in spite of this knowledge, the girl strangely felt a measure of confidence in the man. She had seen him as only a dark, ill-defined shape in the night. She had gained no glimpse of his features, but she liked his voice, the genial yet respectful way in which he addressed her, the cool assurance with which he had taken complete control; whatever the fellow's

past might have been, she felt confidence in him, believed firmly that he was really endeavoring honestly to serve her in this emergency. What his secret purpose might be mattered little, although her impression was that it arose from a desire to revenge himself on Meager, rather than any deep interest he personally felt toward herself. Yet as she sat there waiting, her eyes anxiously searching the black shadows, she was aware of the rapid beating of her heart in eager desire for his return.

It seemed a long while, so long as to almost frighten her, before she became aware of his approach. Indeed, he was actually beside her on foot before she recognized his presence, approaching silently from the opposite direction from that anticipated. Her startled gaze had scarcely distinguished his dim outline, when he spoke, his hand already grasping her horse's rein.

"There, that is over with," he said genially. "Now I'll lead you for the next five hundred yards. After that we'll do some real riding."

Where their course led she could not clearly determine from the saddle, but they moved forward slowly. Kelleen spoke soothingly to the horse, the animal following the man's guidance, seemingly along a very narrow ridge of outcropping rock, barely wide enough to permit his hoofs to cling to its exposed surface. This

passage led downward very gradually, until Deborah realized that they were slightly below the surface of the desert itself, with walls of sand rising on either side. After some hundred yards had been traversed, the path led upward once again, the horse's hoofs now sinking into deep sand. Then a horse whinnied just in front of them, and the next instant she could make out the darker shadow. Kelleen released his grip, with a little laugh of relief.

"Lonely, old fellow? Well, I won't leave you again. Now we've got a straightaway ride for it, Miss Meredith."

"You were hiding the trail?"

"Yes; one cannot be too careful in these things. Those fellows will head on down Nogales way, while these rock ridges will leave no trace."

"Evidently you have used them before for a similar purpose?"

"I'll say I have," carelessly. "And what is more this is a secret which I prefer keeping to myself. Now I'll lead off, and you follow. You'll have to keep up pretty close to see me in the dark, and there will be no noise to guide you in this sand."

"But—if I should lose you?" she asked, staring about, half frightened by the thought.

"No danger; the horse you're on won't get lost.

But if you miss me call out; there's no one to hear in
this desert. Ready now?"

He swung into the saddle, and faced her waiting.

"Yes."

"Then we'll ride fast, and don't be afraid; it's level
as a floor."

CHAPTER XI

MUTUAL RECOGNITION

THE girl rode low in the saddle, her head bent forward to protect her eyes from the shower of grit hurled against her by the ceaseless wind. Confident of the sagacity of her horse, she no longer endeavored to keep even the vague outline of Kelleen in view. They had been riding hard for more than an hour, apparently, and, as near as she could determine from the stars, in a straight line across the dead level of the desert. The man evidently knew his course perfectly, and was heading direct for some refuge, pushing forward recklessly in an effort to reach the chosen spot before daybreak. Deborah was conscious now of her extreme weariness; she could only cling grimly to her seat, aching in every muscle, blindly following his lead. She knew the horse under her was panting for breath, his sides wet with sweat, but Kelleen never once drew rein, or, to her knowledge, even glanced back to assure himself of her presence. From the little glimpses she occasionally gained of him, he apparently sat straight in the saddle, tireless and alert. There were moments when she felt she must actually cry out, her nerves fail-

ing her, but she crushed the desire back, and rode on, dulled with fatigue, becoming finally scarcely conscious of her surroundings.

Then Deborah became aware that the sky before them was growing lighter; she could see the man and horse more distinctly, and even distinguish a narrow vista of the encircling sand plain. The stars overhead began to pale, while a sickly gray overspread the horizon. It was the coming of the dawn, and the girl straightened up in the saddle, aroused to a new interest, and forgetful of her intense weariness, as her heavy eyes endeavored to view the desert scene. The faint light rendered everything excessively lonely, with no outstanding landmark visible, only the changeless monotony of sand, lying almost level, except where the wind had swept it into low ridges, and stretching in every direction. It was all gray both above and below, the sky and earth blending in one gloomy picture of desolation. The only spot of relieving color appeared vaguely as she gazed about, far off there to the right, a shapeless purple haze, which she slowly comprehended must be the distant mesa from which she had fled—the isolated Meager ranch. All else was barren, colorless, lifeless, a drear, and, apparently, endless desert, before which her heart quailed. Never before had it seemed to her so cruelly heartless.

Her eyes and thought centered on the figure of the man riding steadily in front. He never turned in the saddle, or glanced about, but was evidently searching that dull vista in their front, seeking some sign of guidance through the dim light. She could obtain no glimpse of his face, not even its contour, yet how straight he sat in the saddle, his shoulders thrown back, his left hand grasping the rein lightly. His seat was that of the trained, disciplined cavalryman, rather than the cowboy, and she could but mark how easily his body followed the slightest movement of the animal under him. He was tall, erect, strong, young, no doubt of that, the hair showing below his wide hat brim, a dark russet brown. Suddenly, but without glancing back he pointed into the grim, gray desert ahead.

"Do you see anything over yonder?" he asked.
"Just ahead there—a hundred yards?"

She stared where he pointed, both halting their horses, but could perceive nothing except the same drear expanse of sand.

"No; what is it?"

"One of nature's marvels; the place I'm heading for. You can be within ten yards and never know it is there." He turned and faced her smilingly. "Made it straight through the night, too. Why, what's the matter?"

She was staring at him through the dim light,

her lips parted, her eyes expressive of fear. For the moment she did not speak, and he asked again anxiously.

“What is it? Are you afraid of me?”

“I—I know now who you are,” she managed to say.
“You—you are the ‘Frisco Kid.’”

A moment his lips shut tight, a bit grimly; then he laughed.

“Oh, is that the trouble? How do you know I am ‘Frisco?’ and, if I am, what possible difference does it make?”

“But you are, are you not?”

“Sure; but how did you guess?”

“I didn’t guess; I saw you before, and knew you as soon as you turned, with the light on your face.”

“If you had recognized me last night, you’d never have been here, I reckon?”

“No—no; I couldn’t have come—with you. Yet I ought to have suspected all the time. I saw you ride in last night with Judge Garrity. I had a good view of your face from my window, and heard Bob Meager call you by name.”

“No doubt that’s all true enough, but what of it? Outside of my riding in with Garrity what can you know about the ‘Frisco Kid?’ I never pretended to be an angel when you first took up with me, but I don’t per-

ceive any reason why that name should scare you half to death. Ever heard of me before?"

She hesitated, but only for an instant. It was her nature to speak truth.

"Yes, I have," she answered steadily, looking straight at him, yet in some mysterious way not the least afraid. "I have been led to believe you a most desperate character, an outlaw, a criminal, with a price on your head. I have been told many of your exploits—and, and; but why compel me to repeat all this?"

"Because it is extremely interesting, for one thing; quite flattering for even a better reason. If we are going to continue being friends—and I insist that we are—we shall have to come to a mutual understanding. What am I in your estimation? A robber and thief, I suppose?"

"Yes, everything which goes with a border desperado."

"Even murder hinted at?"

"Yes."

"And who told you all this rot—Bob Meager?"

"Oh, no; I heard all about you before he ever came back. That was months ago; there were soldiers through here searching for you, a major and twenty cavalrymen."

"What major?"

"His name was Reynolds."

Kelleen chuckled, and leaned suddenly forward, placing his hand squarely on hers where it rested on the saddle pommel. Somehow she made no effort to withdraw her fingers from the contact, and their eyes met.

"'Pop' Reynolds, hey!" he said lightly. "Then I am sure his story must have been a good one. So he told you I was a mighty bad man? Well, now you've met me, do you believe it?"

"I—I don't know," she confessed doubtfully. "I—I would rather not think that."

"Which is a hopeful sign. Well, please try not to think so for the next half-hour, at least. Then maybe, I can tell you my side of the story. There is no time now, for we've simply got to get under cover. Do you see that blue ridge over yonder? You know what it is?"

"The Meager ranch, isn't it?"

"Yes, and in twenty minutes, as soon as the mist rises, they could pick us out from there with a good field glass. We'll have to find a safer place to talk in than this. How is it—gone plumb back on me?"

She managed to smile.

"No; somehow you won't let me do that."

"Good; then let's finish up this little job. Here, I'll lead the horses; it's only a step to the rim; then we'll both have to make the descent afoot."

They moved forward slowly, into what appeared to be the interminable desert, the man plowing his way through sand, the tired animals following with drooping heads. Deborah could perceive no difference in the drear landscape, although her heart beat fast in anticipation. The sudden identification of her companion had given a new, strange turn to the adventure, but she had gone so far already any retreat now was manifestly impossible. Her mind was confused, yet this much, at least, remained clear—she was in his power, and must trust his word. Oddly it was not hard to do; deep in her heart she liked the man.

Suddenly he stopped, gripping the reins tightly, and pointing with his other hand. Deborah needed no guidance, for her eyes were already riveted on the yawning gash in the surface of the desert, staring down with a startled feeling of awe into the apparently bottomless chasm not five yards away. A moment she gazed, hardly comprehending, too thoroughly dazed by this phenomena of nature to completely grasp its significance. Then she felt Kelleen lift her bodily from the saddle, and lead her forward to the very edge. Below lay exposed in the cold gray of the dawn the full marvel—a deep gorge, as though scooped out by a giant spoon, cut directly across the barren sand plain, with no evidence anywhere above of its existence. To

the eye it seemed some three hundred feet wide, but much deeper, the side walls rocky and irregular, the crevices and ravines choked with sand, while far below appeared the soft green of vegetation, and along the base of the opposite wall, much more precipitous than the side on which they stood, the silvery sparkle of a small stream. It was gloom still down there, a shadowy picture viewed through a mist, rendered even more wonderful by its alluring dimness. To their right the walls curved sharply, leaving in mystery what might lie beyond. Deborah drew a quick breath, glancing aside into the face of the man at her side.

“This is what you meant — the Devil’s Gulch?”

“Yes; but the name is my own. Did you ever before see such a wonder?”

“Yet it is beautiful down there. How can anything like that be possible, here in the heart of all this sand waste? I — I cannot understand.”

“Nor anyone else. Nature keeps her own secrets, although doubtless some hidden spring is the explanation in this case; ages of water flow have wrought the miracle. But what worries me most is, have others beside myself discovered the existence of this oasis. I found it purely by accident, almost fell into it in fact, while riding before a dust storm.”

“You have been down there?”

"Yes; the descent is not particularly difficult along those ravines; the sand gives purchase, even the horses will pick their way."

He smiled at the consternation in her face.

"What is it?" he questioned, "fear of the passage, or of the 'Frisco Kid?'"

She looked straight at him beneath leveled brows, conscious of the sudden flush in her cheeks.

"Neither; I am not afraid."

"I did not believe you would be, for you are not that sort at all. The truth is, young lady, you really haven't so much on me in this matter of recognition. I happen to know quite a bit about you."

"About me? You? What, may I ask?"

"Just a bit, as I say, a mere picture not easily forgotten. I saw you once, before ever you came to Meager's ranch, and I have remembered it ever since. When daylight came that memory haunted me again, but now I've got it all figured out. You do not understand?"

"Certainly not; I have never seen you until last night."

"Very true, which was my misfortune. Do you remember a morning in August, 1918, when the Thirty-third Division went over the top, waded a river, and cleaned out the heights beyond? It was a sharp fight,

and lots of the boys never came back. You remember, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, I was there, and I got mine about eight o'clock. Mine must have been plenty, for they hauled me back to the first-line hospital, and had some sort of surgical job done, before I ever woke up. Then I was lying there in the shade of a crumpled wall, along with a lot of other fellows, waiting for the ambulance to pick us up. You remember that too, don't you?"

"Yes," the tears dimming her eyes. "They were so brave and still."

"Well, at first I didn't know very much. The man next to me died, and the nurse who was with him—she was heavily built with very light hair——"

"Jessie Seevers."

"I don't know, but she gave me a drink of water, and then they put another wounded guy into the place where the dead body had been. He was just a kid, not more than seventeen, I reckon, and was crying like a baby, his nerves all shot to pieces. You were his nurse, and I lay there and watched how you fixed him up. It's not likely you've forgot that."

"No! No!" she bent her head. "He was from my town; he—he died that night."

"I didn't know, for they took me away, but I lay

there and watched you for another hour before the stretchers came. I never saw you again. I would have liked to mighty well, and I won't say I didn't try, but, you see, I didn't even know your name then—just a memory of your face."

He reached out his hand suddenly.

"I—I wish you'd shake hands with me," he said, almost hesitating at his boldness, "and sorter pretend to forget that 'Frisco Kid' business."

"I have forgotten it," she answered steadily, their eyes and hands meeting. "You were a soldier in my division; I believe in you, and am your friend."

CHAPTER XII

STORY OF THE "FRISCO KID"

THIS strange recognition that their lives had previously met, brought to both immediately a greater degree of confidence and faith. To Deborah, Kelleen was no longer a bandit, a fleeing fugitive from justice, but a soldier who had been wounded in battle, who had played the part of a man; while to him the girl was no longer a stray runaway in whom he felt little interest, but a nurse whose face had haunted his memory since he had first watched her in the glow of the French sun. They stood there on the rim of that strange crater, the grim, gray desert circling them about, neither able to think of a word to say. Deborah's eyes fell, and she withdrew her hand, turning to stare into the depths below. The slight movement served to arouse Kelleen to the situation.

"Well, this will never do," he exclaimed, new cheerfulness in his tone. "They will have a glass trained on us over there before we get to cover. We'll send the horses down first; they'll find the best route and we can follow. Come, Sultan, over you go, old boy; oh, no, you're not afraid; we've done this little trick before. Go on, sir!"

He struck the animal with the flat of his hand, and, with a reproachful shake of the head, Sultan slowly and cautiously began the steep descent, seeking a path along the deeper layers of sand, and zigzagging from gulch to gulch better to obtain foothold. The other horse followed, but not without a struggle, trembling with fear, and keeping close to the trail left by the leader. Kelleen touched the girl's arm.

"Come," he said briefly, a bit of command in the voice. "Really it is not so dangerous as it looks from here. Sultan has found the best trail, and we'll drill along after him."

He searched the horizon with keen eyes; then shrugged his shoulders rather contentedly.

"Ugly, isn't it? but for that tinge of red in the east, and that spot of blue yonder, just a barren gray waste. And yet, do you know, the thing somehow gets into your blood, and you learn to like it. I get sick to death of the desert, but I always drift back again; there is fascination about its very loneliness and silence."

"Yes, I know," she answered slowly. "I—I hated it when I first came; thought I could not bear it for another hour. But now the dread has all gone away; it never seems quite the same any more, sometimes hard and cruel, and again soft and friendly—but always different from anything else in the world."

He laughed bitterly.

"The charm is that of a rattlesnake you will discover, as treacherous and destructive. I distrust its every mood. The horses are already at the bottom; let's go."

They made it slowly, picking their path along the trail left by the two animals, finding purchase in the sand, occasionally steadied by an outcropping rock, or the exposed root of some clinging shrub. The drop was more extensive than Deborah previously had realized from above, and the sharp descent left her breathless. The enclosing walls towering high overhead, revealing merely a narrow strip of blue sky, and the increasing gloom, as they descended lower, brought to her a feeling of awe. Kelleen led the way, occasionally turning about with word of encouragement, or pointing out a better course than the one he had just taken. Yet the passage was neither specially hard, nor dangerous, merely requiring caution and a clear brain. Once she slipped, but he caught her instantly, laughing lightly at the mishap, and the girl felt no sense of fear.

The sand disappeared as they reached the lower levels, the walls becoming sheer rock, but slashed with gullies, and finally these were more or less choked with vegetable growth. At the bottom, where the two horses were contentedly munching the short grass, the valley had all the appearance of a new land, made fresh and

verdant by the magic touch of water. There were small groves of trees scattered here and there, interspersed amid patches of greenest verdure, with the glimmer of a flowing stream winding crookedly in the midst. Coupled with those high, gray walls towering on every side, barren and desolate, and the memory of that wide, seemingly boundless stretch of gray desert above, the effect was weird, scarcely comprehensible. Deborah at the foot of the long descent, clung to the projecting root of a tree, and stared about her with wide-open eyes, unable to restrain her amazement.

"Why this is simply marvelous," she exclaimed. "I did not appreciate what it meant from up there. You have been down here before, you said?"

"Yes," he answered soberly. "Once, but with no opportunity to explore thoroughly. I intended to come back, but had no thought I should have a companion."

"But is this all? just this little narrow hole?"

"I am not sure, but think not. I believe there must be a sharp turn out yonder, and perhaps a natural slope, or entrance at the farther end. I mean to explore a little later, after we eat breakfast, and you consent to rest awhile. We have the whole day before us, and will not venture forth again until night."

"You—you do not believe you are the only one who has made this discovery?"

"No; that is hardly probable. There were reasons why it was impossible for me to determine the truth when I was here before, yet I found evidences that others had been before me—the remains of a camp fire, an exploded cartridge shell, and even the imprint of cattle. I have no wish to frighten you, Miss Deborah, but my idea is that probably this place has been, and perhaps is still, a hiding place for thieves."

"Cattle stealers, you mean?"

"Yes, and munition runners. This whole border is honey-combed with that sort of thing, and this hole is certainly an ideal hide-out. It is not more than a hard night's ride from the border line, and so thoroughly hidden away that I never even suspected its existence until I accidentally rode straight into it; and I thought I knew every inch, and secret of this desert country. Come, let's sit down here, and eat what we have, for I am not going to risk a fire, and I'll tell you the theory I've worked out. I may be all wrong, but I'm keen to find out for sure."

"Please do."

The bag of food the girl had secured from the ranch kitchen was carefully strapped to the saddle of Sultan. Kelleen procured this and spread the contents on a strip of grass. They were both eating when he resumed speech.

"I am inclined to think," he said gravely, "that this has been a rendezvous for that sort of traffic for years. I don't believe many have known about it, or else some whispers would have reached me, but this particular section of the border has been a sore spot for years. More stuff has been slipped through along here than in all the rest of the distance between Texas and California. I happen to know this for a fact, and that the government has never yet been able to locate the leak. In my judgment it is right here."

"Here?" her eyes half frightened at his sober assertion, staring into the silence. "Why, how could it be?"

"Very easily; someone stumbled on this place just exactly as I have—perhaps several somebodies—but my present notion is that the discoverer was either Bob Meager, or one of the disreputable gang he has with him. His determination to get control of the ranch at his father's death, the fellows he has brought there from across the line, and Garrity's deep interest in the affair, all combine to make me suspicious. Do you see? The ranch, and this hole, together, make an ideal outfit for running either cattle or munitions across the border, and some of those fellows over there have been at that job for years."

"Then how do you dare come here with me?"

"Because it alone promised security for this one day.

Tonight we'll go on, but we could not travel across the desert in daylight without being seen."

"Nor along a regular trail?"

"No; this was the only possible hiding place. I had every reason to believe we would find it unoccupied. It certainly was yesterday, with no fresh signs anywhere. In my judgment those fellows have not begun their new work yet; they are merely getting ready," he laughed. "Besides this is largely mere suspicion after all; perhaps I am altogether wrong."

Her eyes were on his face inquiringly.

"You dislike Bob Meager very much?"

"I am actually afraid I do."

"Was that why you were so willing to help me?"

"Not altogether; it may have had weight, I confess. Now, however, that thought has gone entirely."

"And Judge Garrity?"

"He is utterly despicable."

"Yet you seemed very friendly with him only last night. On excellent terms."

He smiled good-naturedly.

"You are quite a cross-examiner, Miss Meredith. Sometimes you know it becomes necessary to play a part in life. What is the cause for all this shrewd questioning?"

"I hardly know myself, but it is all so strange, and

STORY OF THE "FRISCO KID"

has happened so suddenly. I am just beginning to think clearly. Do you really mind if I ask you something more?"

"Not in the least. Now that I really know who you are, I am rather inclined to answer most questions frankly."

"I—I hope you will. How did you happen to serve in the Thirty-third Division—they were all Illinois troops?"

"So you even noticed that. I was transferred."

"From what command?"

"The regulars."

"Was that not very unusual? You—you were surely an enlisted man?"

"I did not say so," he smiled back, "and now that you drive me to a confession, I might as well make a full breast of it. I was transferred to take command of a company."

"A captain?"

"Yes."

"Why!" she drew in her breath sharply, leaning forward with new eagerness. "Then surely you are not now what I have thought you to be—an outlaw, a renegade? You are not really the—the 'Frisco Kid?'"

"Oh, yes, I am. At least I am all the 'Frisco Kid'

there ever was to the best of my knowledge, although, I fear I fail to line up entirely with the reputation so kindly given me by 'Pop' Reynolds. I rather regret this, for your sake, yet no one could possibly equal his imagination in real life. The best thing I can do is tell you the truth, isn't it? Very well, I am going to do just that—do you know why?"

"No—unless because you think I may have guessed it already?"

"Hardly, for it would be easy still to cause you to believe otherwise. The real reason is because I like you, and desire to retain your faith. The 'Frisco Kid' is an entirely manufactured character, made for a practical purpose. Do you grasp the idea?"

She shook her head, but her eager eyes belied the action.

"You have a glimmer, nevertheless. I'll explain. This portion of the border has been a hotbed of outlawry for years. It has baffled every commanding officer assigned to this district. We had no information to work on; suspects were numerous, but proof lacking. Finally a plan of action was evolved, but to carry it out successfully, a desperado with an established reputation as a bad man was first of all most essential. With this end in view the 'Frisco Kid' was carefully put on the stage. Newspapers along the coast, and near the

border, began to note his exploits; dispatches regarding him were sent east; rewards for his capture, dead or alive, were posted. It was intimated, finally, when his name had become sufficiently familiar, that he had escaped into Mexico, and then that he had been seen again in this neighborhood. Troops were dispatched to run him down, and word to that effect scattered broadcast on both sides the line."

"Major Reynolds?"

"Yes, he had a squad out, and, evidently, from what you tell me, did a fine bit of advertising on his own account. You see the purpose of it all?"

"To win the confidence of the real gang?"

"Exactly; and it worked. At least we have a far better line on the matter than we had three months ago; the end is already in sight."

"But—but you run such a terrible risk?"

"Oh, there is some danger, of course. The lads will kill, no doubt, but there is no more peril than any soldier must expect to face. It was a duty."

"But who then are you?"

"Daniel Kelleen, just as I told you, a captain in the—rd Cavalry."

"You—you volunteered for this service?"

"Yes; you see it was impossible for the Department to use any officer who had been stationed lately along

this border. Such a one might be immediately recognized, and the whole scheme ruined at once. At the same time, whoever was chosen to play the character must have intimate knowledge of the border. I met the requirements fully, as I had served here ten years ago as a mere boy, and knew the country fairly well. Later I had some experience in rough work farther north. The Department commander selected me for the job, and—well, I didn't refuse the assignment; so here I am, the 'Frisco Kid.'"

Deborah held out her hand impulsively.

"I'm glad you told me," she said in all frankness.

CHAPTER XIII

A NEW VIEWPOINT

HE had been sleeping for nearly two hours, with head supported on a saddle, the steep wall of the canyon on one side of her and the valley itself shut completely off by a thick growth of shrub. Deborah had not supposed it possible to lose consciousness when she first consented to lie down, at Kelleen's urgent request. She had not realized how tired she was, and, in fact, rested there some time in this nook he had found, staring with wide-open eyes up at the strip of blue sky, her mind still active. There was almost no noise to disturb her, only the occasional sound of a moving horse grazing not far away, and, by lifting her head slightly, she knew that her companion had also stretched himself out on the grass, across a narrow ravine, and lay there motionless. The knowledge of who this man really was had brought her instant relief, and a new sense of safety in his presence. She no longer felt any personal fear of him, and his words had convinced her that the day promised no danger from without. He had even scaled the cliff once more to gain another view across the desert in the bright sun-glare,

and his confidence in their safety left her abundantly satisfied. So finally her heavy eyes closed, and she slept.

Something must have awokened the girl suddenly, for she sat bolt upright, with eyes wide open in fright. Yet nothing about her appeared wrong, or strange. Kelleen had disappeared, but beyond this no change of any kind was apparent. The sun, now almost directly overhead, was pouring its rays to the very bottom of the chasm, leaving a narrow ribbon of gold through the center, and one of the horses could be seen grazing in the midst of it. The second animal had vanished, but in all probability it had merely strayed farther away beyond the range of her direct vision. The entire scene was so calm and peaceful that Deborah's heart ceased its first violent throbbing, and she even smiled at her earlier fear, and arose expectantly to her feet.

She had been confused, but the movement brought back full consciousness. The memory of the night returned vividly, but more like a dream than any reality. The course of events appeared so unnatural, so fantastic, it was difficult for her to grasp the truth—that she was actually a fugitive, a wife fleeing from her husband, trusting everything, life, reputation, to the mercies of a stranger, and hiding here out in this strange desert excavation waiting only for the darkness of night. No

imagination, no dream of fiction, could seem so unreal, and she hid her face in her hands while she struggled to assimilate the truth. But when it finally came, it brought no deep regret. Fate after all had been kind to her; the man she had been compelled to trust, the man whom she had believed an outlaw, a ruffian of the border, merely befriending her as a passing whim, had proven himself a soldier and a gentleman. With this discovery all her former doubt, her previous questioning, had vanished into a faith which brought with it new strength and courage. Whatever lay before could be faced confidently—she was no longer alone.

But what had become of Kelleen? Through the tree branches behind which she had been concealed, Deborah searched the full length of the chasm within reach of her vision, but discovered no trace of his presence. It was all completely deserted, and primitive, nowhere exhibiting evidence of ever before having known human occupancy. Yet the range of her observation was limited. She seemed absolutely surrounded, shut in by the precipitous walls rising high above on every side. It was more like a gigantic well, dug by some monster shovel in the desert sands, than the bed of a stream, she remembered dimly that he had spoken of a sharp curve in the side walls there to the right, and a portion he had

not as yet explored. No doubt he had gone there now, somewhere beyond the bend, and out of sight, endeavoring to learn its mystery, confident of her safety; believing she would continue asleep, he had taken advantage of the opportunity to learn all that was possible of their strange hiding place. Probably he had ridden one of the horses, and was even then just beyond that jutting ridge of rock. She imagined she could even perceive the sharp curve in the side wall into which he must have disappeared down the concealed canyon. It was not likely the man would be absent long. It must already be noon by the sun, and, actuated by a desire to do something, she finally began to arrange a meal for his return. She had opened the bag of provisions, when suddenly her eyes caught sight of something moving far below, and to her right, objects at first hard to distinguish, and then quickly discerned as two horsemen, emerging from the very cleft in the rocks where she had decided the canyon probably ran. They came, steadily on, growing more distinct each minute, yet still too far away for recognition.

She crouched lower behind her screen, and waited breathlessly. Two, what could that mean? It seemed highly improbable that Kelleen could have encountered a friend in this spot—a man in whom he had faith—who was returning with him. If this was, as he so

evidently believed, a hidden lair of outlaws, a rendezvous for border crime, it was hardly possible he had met with any comrade here, if—if he was really what he had claimed to be. The thought of that “if” struck her like a blow. But was he? was he? She had nothing but the man’s own word to rely upon; no proof, no evidence beyond his own assertion, and—and everything seemingly against it. The truth of this came to her most forcibly, her eyes strained to watch every movement of those approaching horsemen. She could perceive enough already to be certain that Kelleen was not one of the group; they were both Mexicans, or at least so attired, and their mounts bore Mexican trappings. Little as the girl knew of the frontier, she at once realized the danger of being discovered by such men.

Yet what could she do to escape observation? Even if they were approaching with no intimation whatever of her presence, their eyes could not fail to detect the horse grazing in the valley below, and they would surely make some effort to discover how the strange animal chanced to be there. While the fellows might not have encountered Kelleen, the presence of a strange bronco in that unusual place must certainly arouse suspicion. It would not be held an accident, especially as any close examination of the animal would quickly disclose evi-

dences of the night's hard ride. Deborah was conscious of trembling in every limb, as she crouched there, behind the screen of leaves, instinctively grasping the only weapon in her possession. Then she suddenly recognized one of the riders as Juan Sanchez.

They had followed her then, and were seeking her now. There could be no possible doubt as to Sanchez' mission. How the fellow had reached there so quickly, and why it even had been suspected she had sought this remote spot of refuge, were unsolved questions, yet it was highly probable that searching parties had been dispatched in all directions, and the Mexican had been the one whom Fate had headed that way. Anyhow she could not speculate as to how, or why. Whether by accident, or design, the two were here, and were unquestionably enemies to be avoided. Deborah could not even guess what had already occurred below, yet the two riders exhibited no outward signs of encounter; they were approaching, making no effort at concealment. In some way they must have failed then to meet Kelleen, yet the grazing horse could not escape attention; they would search for the missing rider, and she must find hiding place somewhere among the rocks.

Her eyes traced the rugged bluff hopelessly; to attempt scaling that would only bring her into full view, yet there was a fringe of thick bushes below into which

she might plunge. This seemed the only hiding place available, and, before seeking concealment there herself, the girl had sufficient presence of mind hastily to fling the various articles scattered about into the oblivion of the thicket. The next moment she crept through the thick fringe of brush into the shadow. The two horsemen came slowly, cautiously, up the slight slope, staring about them suspiciously, yet finding nothing at the summit but a bit of trampled grass to tell that the spot had been occupied previously.

Deborah, secure in a cleft of the rock behind a five-foot screen of chaparral, crouched motionless, with ears strained to detect the slightest sound. The first words spoken were reassuring—the fellows were not seeking her, possessed, indeed, no suspicion of her presence. She was unable to see, but could hear plainly, and there was no difficulty in recognizing the voice of Sanchez.

“Whatever do you suppose has become of them, Jose?” he asked complainingly. “They were to have come yesterday, you tell us, and yet they are not here.”

“But someone is, señor—see, there has been camp made.”

“That was the guard; the ranch brand is on the pony grazing yonder; I took note as we rode by. I wonder where in hell the fellow has gone? But he has naught

to do with Casebeer's outfit. The gulch is empty, except for the lad we met below."

"And what does he do in here, señor? Who was it you call him?"

Sanchez laughed mirthlessly.

"Hiding out, Jose; there is no reason to fear that guy. Besides he's Meager's friend; he was at the ranch last night, and how the devil he got here so quick bothers me. You don't know him?"

"No, señor."

"I'll bet you know of him just the same. I called him 'Frisco;' he's the 'Kid.'"

"The 'Frisco Kid?' Sure, I hear of him. They say he held up the Los Colos stage."

Sanchez laughed.

"'Tis not all they say. He is the devil's own, if half the tales be true—a smooth-spoken boy enough, but not the sort to make sport of. Meager knows him—aye!" and he slapped his knee roughly at the happy thought, "and that is why the lad is here, no doubt. I have it now; Bob could not come himself, Jose, so he sent this fellow. You know what happened last night?"

"Happened? where?"

"At the ranch. Why, of course, you don't; you were on herd, and only joined me as I rode out. Why Meager got married to that pretty Americano nurse. Hell, it

was no choice of hers if I know aught of a woman's ways, but little enough Señor Bob cares for that. I've seen him do the same trick before. That fat judge came out from Nogales, and did the job, and 'twas scarce likely Meager would desert his blushing bride to come out here to meet Casebeer's outfit. So he sent the 'Kid.' But why the hell didn't he tell me, I wonder?"

"Who tell you?—the 'Kid?'"

"Either one of 'em; I like to know what I'm bein' stacked up against on a job like this. We've played safe enough so far, but some day a government man is goin' to stumble onto this hole, and there'll sure be trouble a-plenty. Casebeer's lucky, but his outfit this trip would be a mighty rich haul if he should happen to fall down."

"Guns?"

"Ammunition, and booze for Villa; some combination that. It is to go over the border tonight, and a nice wad of money comes back. That will be the 'Kid's' job, perhaps, if Meager doesn't show up by dark: we haven't any orders beyond here."

"You think Señor Bob maybe would send him to bring back the money?"

"Sure; it's fifty-fifty with Casebeer, and 'Frisco' is all right. He's square as they make 'em, I've always heard. Raises hell, of course, now an' then, but he

never double-crossed anybody. He ain't that kind, an' Bob knows it; they've run together down below. I got it figured out that's what the fellow is up here for—to help out on this deal. Ain't that him roundin' that bluff yonder? Sure it is—ridin' this way. I'm goin' to ask him straight when he gets here."

CHAPTER XIV

THE HAND FROM THE ROCK

DEBORAH, frightened by what she heard, lifted herself slightly so as to see better up the narrow valley. The approaching horseman was in plain view, and, even at that distance, the girl had no doubt as to his identity. The straight, slender figure in the saddle was unmistakable to her eyes, and the wide brim of his hat, blown upward in the wind, even seemed to reveal the features of his face. Her very heart seemed to cease beating as she knelt, anxiously watching his approach, the horse loping steadily, the man swaying gently to the movement of the animal. Who, indeed, was he—this Daniel Kelleen? this “Frisco Kid?” Was he what she had begun to dream through the long night, listening to his voice, his partial explanation—a real man in whom she could trust and believe? in whose honor she could confide?

Or was he what these ruffians so confidently proclaimed—an outlaw, a desperado of the frontier, an escaped felon, hiding from justice, and even now engaged in the committal of crime? Surely they knew the man far better than she, and the very fact that he

was the acknowledged friend of Bob Meager; that he had brought her here into this secret hiding place of outlaws, knowing what must be encountered, added to her doubt. Surely he did know; these fellows took it for granted that he was present on the same criminal mission as themselves; he had deliberately left her, and rode away seeking traces of Casebeer's gang in the valley—seemingly there was no escape from the one conclusion, that he was part of the conspiracy. He had lied to her, deceived her, told her a fairy tale, laughing at her credulity, while coldly going forward with his own plans. In his hands, his control, she was as much the victim of Meager as though she had remained back yonder on the ranch. Her escape was but a dream; she was still a helpless prisoner.

Deborah grasped all this almost instantly, unable to perceive any possibility of escape from the net. Her limbs trembled, yet she could only kneel there in silence, watching the approach of the rider. There was nothing she could do, no place where she could go—the high cliff towered above unclimbable, the two Mexicans were below, the unsaddled horse beyond any possible reach. A wild hope thrilled into her heart, that perhaps this man was not all bad; that whatever his real life might be, he may have meant to be square with her, and would yet protect her. Surely he never had revealed her

presence to these others; perhaps that was why he had not returned with them, hoping she might see the strangers, and hide. He had no chance to give any other warning, and was compelled to trust her wit. This was a hope, a wild, reckless hope, which yielded the girl courage. She would stay there, and wait, until she learned the truth. His first words sent a thrill through her heart—he was playing a part for her protection.

He reined in his mount sharply, glancing keenly about, but with face expressionless as his eyes finally encountered the two awaiting him.

“Whose horse is that?” he asked inquiringly, indicating the grazing animal.

“I know not that, señor; ‘tis Meager’s brand.”

“I can see that for myself, but it was not here when I came by. Was anyone besides you two sent in here on this business?”

“No, señor,” there was a touch of deference in Sanchez’ voice most unusual, Deborah was quick to note and appreciate. “Only the two of us. Yet it might be, for we knew not even that you were to come also.”

“That was an after-thought, and why I rode so hard and straight. I knew about you, didn’t I?”

“*Si, señor;* no doubt.”

"But about this other fellow, Juan? You saw no one?"

"Not a sign, yet there has been camp made here; the signs are plain. 'Tis likely to be the guard."

"The guard? Meager's, you mean? Does he keep a guard in here?"

"At times, señor; not only here, but in each direction. He is wise, señor. No one approaches the ranch but first he have warning. 'Tis hard to catch him asleep."

"But who is this man?"

Sanchez shook his head, sitting on the ground, smoking calmly.

"I know not that, señor," he admitted indifferently. "One of the herders. It can make no difference; he has no orders but to bear word to the ranch if anything go wrong. If he wait here he be back some time."

Kelleen swung one leg carelessly over the pommel of his saddle, and deliberately rolled and lit a cigarette. His face expressed no emotion, no particular interest, yet Deborah was certain the keen, searching eyes had swept swiftly over her covert, and up the steep front of the overowering cliff. He suspected where she was hidden, and was endeavoring to protect her from discovery; but who was he really playing fair with? was he trying to deceive both? or merely

playing a desperate game in which a single slip would mean disaster? Was he outlaw, or honest man? Nothing in the situation, or in the conversation thus far overheard, gave her certainty. She dare not move, scarcely venture to breathe, as she watched the three men below through the tangle of limbs and leaves. Kelleen sat motionless across his saddle, the blue cigarette smoke circling lazily above his head, evidently in perfect repose. It was some time before he even spoke.

"When is this Casebeer gang expected?" he questioned finally.

"Tonight, señor; it was to be earlier, but they not come. Now not until tonight; they never cross the desert by day."

"No, I reckon not; it would be too risky. Any trouble here lately?"

Sanchez smiled, showing his yellow teeth, and waved a hand in the air.

"*Non, non*, señor; not of late trouble. It was all fixed. The Señor Meager he know who best to see. They come—yes; last week a man come, an' question, but he ride away, an' know nothing. A troop come, soldiers from the fort, an' stay two, three day. I talk with officer; he drink with Bob; then they go back to Nogales. It be all right sure then—see? We know

they not be back soon as this week. So we send word for Casebeer."

"Yes, I see; but it is not so sure after all. Perhaps they do come back."

The Mexican shook his head positively.

"No, señor, we know. We have watch always. Señor Meager very slick bird when not drunk. You at the ranch last night?"

"Certainly; you saw me there. Why?"

"You not there alone, señor. The judge came also from Nogales. You know the judge?"

"Not well, but sufficiently. Is he your man?"

"He brought the word. 'Twas for that he came, not to marry Meager. That all came later, by what you call luck. The woman was a fool, señor, to defy him — what could she do?"

"What did she do?"

"Pist! I mean before; after it was nothing. I left while they still drank, señor, but Bob will have had what was his before now. There is no vixen he can't tame, for she is not the first of them. A damn pretty girl, señor."

Kelleen's eyes lifted to the chaparral above, but there was no change in his face.

"Not having seen her I am unable to say, Sanchez," he answered easily; then straightened suddenly in the

saddle. "Where does this northern gang come from?"

"Out of Calabasis, señor, by way of the river."

"Then they will enter down below, through the gorge. This is no place for us. Suppose they were delayed last night, and took a chance to come on this morning by daylight—and why not? They'd be under rock cover all the last part of the way. It's beyond here that they'd have the open desert to cross. Let's ride down there, and wait."

"'Tis no hurry señor," Sanchez protested easily. "I would see the herder first."

"For what?" a new ring of command had crept unconsciously into the American's voice. "He has nothing to do with this. Meager gave this job to me, and I'm going to see that it is done right. Saddle up, both of you; there is just as good camping ground down below. Come on, be lively about it."

There was a jumble of Mexican oaths, but something in the stern eyes of the "Frisco Kid," backed no doubt by his reputation, compelled obedience, and within five minutes the three were trotting soberly down the valley. No one of them glanced back, and Deborah lifting her head higher and higher to peer after them through the brush screen, watched until they disappeared entirely about the sharp protuberance of rock, which marked the end of the vista. Kelleen had done this purposely;

his conversation with these men had been largely carried on for her benefit and guidance. He knew where she was; that she could easily overhear. Through these means he endeavored to convey to her unsuspected, the complete situation in which he was involved, and then, this accomplished, he had inveigled the two unsuspecting Mexicans away, thus giving her opportunity to escape unseen. For some reason he was evidently avoiding a quarrel with the fellows; he preferred to deceive them, to permit their going on with their contemplated crime, in which they were convinced he was also implicated. But why?

Deborah was not yet wholly convinced of the man's innocence. In spite of his evident intention of shielding her from discovery, his intimate association with Bob Meager, the understanding between him and Sanchez, was seemingly proof positive that he was an important link in this conspiracy. The man was endeavoring to make her think otherwise, but the doubt of him lingered in her mind. She would gladly have fled alone, had she known the way across those drear leagues of sand. In the night she had begun to trust, to believe; the fellow's very recklessness and good humor had been attractive; her vague suspicion seemed to vanish in his presence. But now this doubt returned with redoubled vigor, and, for the moment, she actu-

ally feared him as much as the man she had tried to kill. More, perhaps, for Meager was only a rough, passionate brute, while the very nature of Kelleen rendered him a far more dangerous adversary. If he also was interested in her—and the girl felt that he was—she was in greater danger now than on the ranch from which she had fled. She shrank from the thought, yet it haunted her, and would not be driven away. Where could she go? What could she do to escape the man's return? Suicidal, impossible as it appeared, she must find some means of leaving that fatal valley before he came back again alone seeking her. No horse could climb those rock walls down which they had plunged in entering. Yet surely there must be a way, a bridle path leading to the plain above—the only possible exit could not be at the other end. These outlaws would never dare hide here in a mere cul-de-sac, in a blind trap, having no hope of escape if discovered. At least she could seek for some secret passage; if she failed it would be better than hopelessly remaining where she was.

The girl drew back slowly, with eyes searching the open valley, intent first of all on reaching the horse grazing below. The only possible way was the one she had taken in climbing there, along a ledge of stone close in against the rock wall. The whole face of the

cliff was a mass of trailing vines, clinging in some mysterious way to imperceptible crevices in the rock, completely veiling its front far up above her reach. It was like a hanging, green tapestry, with here and there a curious red flower flaming against the green background of leaves. Deborah pressed these back to gain passage, and had advanced a dozen steps, or more, when she stopped, paralyzed with fear, staring into two terrifying eyes. She could not move a limb, or scream in that first instant of horror. Then a hand reached out, swept the concealing vines aside, and gripped her.

CHAPTER XV

WITHIN THE TUNNEL

DEBORAH struggled to break away, emitting one startled cry for help, before the fingers of her assailant closed viselike on her throat. She was in the grasp of a giant, merciless in the exercise of his power, and felt herself dragged helplessly through the tangle of vines into blackness beyond. It was a man; she knew that, although she had no glimpse of the face, and made desperate effort at release, given unusual strength by terror; but the grip on her throat tightened remorselessly, and her power of resistance waned, until she suddenly lost consciousness and all sense of her surroundings. Her body lay limp in the fellow's arms, and, with a growl of satisfaction, he bore the motionless, seemingly lifeless body, back through the deepening shadows, and cast it down on the stone floor. The vines closed behind them, leaving scarcely a vestige of daylight showing through the thick veil of leaves. The man stood above the huddled figure of the girl, hardly defined, shapeless in the gloom, and laughed silently. He bent down and touched her, only to straighten up once more, convinced she was not

dead. He seemed doubtful, hesitant, uncertain what to do next. He could only stare at that helpless form huddled at his feet, and mutter to himself, almost incoherently.

“Not dead—no; live maybe. One hour, two hour lie so; then remember. What I do then? Tonight, tomorrow I see. Now what else comes?”

His eyes, apparently accustomed to the dimness, enabled him to move about as though in a well-lighted room. A rifle leaned against the back wall, and he picked it up, tested its mechanism, and moved silently forward to the entrance, the weapon resting in the crook of his arm.

Cautiously he parted the leaves and looked out, searching the full length of the deserted valley. Nothing of consequence met his gaze, for he rested back on a convenient boulder, and continued his vigil, as motionless as the stone on which he sat. He must have remained in that position for an hour, occasionally shaking his head, and muttering incoherently to himself, now and then peering back into the darkness behind, but generally with keen gaze directed to the sun-lit valley without. He remained vigilantly on guard, with fingers fumbling the lock of his gun, his figure tense, for action. Then, suddenly, and without warning, the fellow appeared to relax, his head sink-

ing forward on the arm resting above the gun muzzle, and he sank into a deep sleep.

Deborah stirred slightly in the black corner where she had been thrown, and slowly, painfully opened her eyes. At first she failed to realize what had occurred, and stared about, seeing nothing through the dim light. Her body, weakened by struggle, seemed helplessly inert, while at first her mind failed to function. No flash of memory recurred to aid her. Full consciousness came slowly, reawakening first to the bruised body, and the throat lacerated by those cruel hands. She could scarcely swallow, or move her limbs without pain. Then, her eyes accustoming themselves to the pervading gloom, the girl began dimly to perceive objects about her, and thus grasp something of the situation. Little by little the details came back—the rocky platform without; the departure of the three men down the valley; her determination to escape before Kelleen could return; the screen of clinging vines concealing the face of the precipice; the mad glow of those menacing eyes through the tangle of leaves; that outstretched, hairy arm, beastlike in its appearance; the clutch on her throat; the wild, hopeless struggle, ending so quickly in darkness. She could scarcely restrain a scream of terror, yet the very sense of her situation held her silent, her whole body trembling violently.

Where was she? Where had her assailant gone? Was the thing man, or beast? The questions were unanswerable; she could be assured of but one thing—she was still alive.

Slowly, silently the girl succeeded in lifting herself partially from off the hard rock on which she lay, using the rough outcroppings of the wall as support to the effort. Her bruised limbs ached, and her head throbbed with agony, as she changed her posture ever so slightly, yet the movement served to clear her mind, and bring back a measure of courage. She was not only alive still, but she could think, act, and perceive now something of her surroundings. She could not make out a great deal, however, as the only light was that which stole in through the intricacies of those shadowing leaves concealing the opening. These were so thick as to be almost impenetrable, a vagrant ray here and there alone visible. But these were sufficient dimly to reveal outlines, enabling her to guess. She was either in a natural cave, or a tunnel excavated directly into the face of the cliff. The roughness of the side wall, which she could touch, and the apparent lowness of the roof above, led her to believe that this hole had either been dug entirely by men, or else decidedly enlarged from its original dimensions. She almost felt assured the marks of tools could actually be distin-

guished by touch of the fingers along the surface. But for what purpose had it been done? who were the men engaged on such a work in this hidden, barren country? were they still there? and what might be their object—concealment? or a search after treasure?

This was a land of crime, of outlawed men, of desperate chances, and war against fate. She knew little of its hidden mysteries, only that nothing was too strange to occur in this vast desolation of the border. Here men lived continually in open defiance of the law, and counted murder as but part of the day's work. It was far more likely that this hole, chiseled out of the cliff, was the hidden rendezvous of some gang of criminals, than the honest effort of gold seekers to wrest treasure from the heart of the barren hill. This conception also accorded more completely with the mysterious attack on her, the rudeness with which she had been assaulted, the leaving her lying there half dead. Surely no miner would be guilty of such an act of brutality; only intense fear of discovery, by someone half crazed by terror, could account for such violent action. She must be in the hands of criminals, outlaws, willing to commit any atrocity rather than risk possible betrayal. Their action had been dictated wholly by fear of discovery, and was proof positive they would hesitate at no crime to safeguard themselves.

Nor was there any help, outside herself, of escape. She had, perhaps, been left for dead; certainly believed so severely injured as to be safe for the present. Although she could perceive no guard, yet, it was highly probable that any movement on her part would be observed instantly. She must remain silent, cautious. Her thought swept back to Kelleen, and the memory of the man was no longer wholly fear of his presence. In spite of her doubts, her distrust, the recollection of their night's ride together recurred now as almost a pleasant remembrance. Criminal, outlaw, he might be, but he was no brute, no beast of the jungle; rather he had shown himself a man, even a gentleman. Yet what help could she expect from him? If he was loyal, and worthy, how could he be of any aid?

Beyond all doubt the man would return in search of her. He had shrewdly guessed where she lay in concealment, and had led those others away for no other purpose but to leave her there securely hidden. As soon as he could rid himself from their observation he would surely be back once more. But even if he came had she left any trail he could follow? Plainsman as he undoubtedly was, how could he discover this hidden place in which she now found herself prisoner? She had gone; that was all, disappeared, vanished, leaving no mark of guidance behind. Interested

as he might be, he could never solve the riddle, except by pure accident. Her passage back from the edge of the covert had been made over smooth rock, on which her feet could have left no slightest trace. If she had flown away into the air the final mystery of her disappearance could not have been greater. Suppose he even approached the front of the precipice, or stumbled blindly into the mouth of the tunnel behind the canopy of vines—what then? She could conceive but one inevitable result—his death.

She was surprised, shocked at how that new thought sickened and disheartened her. The very picture of the scene rising before her imagination left the girl faint and trembling with apprehension. She doubted him, had fled to escape him; shrank even now from being again alone in his power; yet some memory of that night, through which they had ridden together, could not be destroyed. In some way his personality had touched her strongly, and the tie refused to snap. Yet death certainly stood grimly between them now. If this guardian of the hidden tunnel could treat her as he had—actuated by terror, or whatever cause had led to his action—he would surely prove no more merciful to him. If this man could assault, and hold her prisoner, he would never hesitate at murder to prevent discovery. He would be on watch, would

mark Kelleen's approach, his every footstep. Skulking behind that screen of leaves, unseen, unsuspected, he could kill safely, and in that wild land the report of the death shot would bring no danger. And surely he was on watch; he must know she never had come into the sunken valley alone.

Deborah's searching eyes, now able to distinguish objects with some clearness, scanned the rock walls to the obscured entrance. At first she could not be sure, but finally the vague outlines of the man seated on the rock became visible. He was huddled forward in such grotesque posture as scarcely to appear human, but gradually the girl realized what the uncouth shape must be, could even detect the long, scraggly beard, the great breadth of shoulders, and the rifle, on which he leaned. With this discovery came the instant assurance also that the fellow slept soundly. But was he there alone? She lifted herself slowly, cautiously, to her knees, eagerly searching the surrounding darkness, but could see no sign of any other presence. A thrill of hope brought courage, and new strength to her limbs. Might it not be possible for her to steal forward silently, and then, with a sudden spring, clear the obstruction of vines, and gain the free day without, before the slumbering guard could even comprehend what had occurred? The horse was not a hundred yards away,

and, even if she had to leap boldly from off the shelf of rock, she would willingly dare all for a chance at escape. Yet she had not advanced three steps until she realized the impossibility of the effort—the sleeping body utterly blocked the passage.

She could perceive the fellow now with some distinctness, a giant of a man, with long, apelike arms, bare and hairy, an oddly formed head, almost pear-shaped, long hair shading the face, and a black beard sweeping to his knees. There was no suggestion of age, or weakness, in his appearance, and she drew back, cowering at remembrance of the mad grip of those hands about her throat; she dare not test such strength again. Slowly, silently, without actually knowing why, the girl drew back into the deeper darkness behind her, guiding herself with one hand against the rough wall. Into her mind had come the faint hope of another egress somewhere, the very purity of the air suggesting such a possibility, she even imagining she felt a draught upon her cheek. Yet there was no glimmer of light. Once her groping foot struck against fragments of rock left lying where they fell. She bent down better to assure herself of the obstruction, and her exploring fingers touched a pick. It was indeed a mine, then; this secret excavation had been man's work; Nature may have pointed the way, but this tunnel itself orig-

inated through lust of wealth. The guard, the intense fear of discovery, the hatred of intruders, arose from this same cause. Her captors were not outlaws, but men crazed by fear of losing what they had uncovered in these rocky hills. Yet this knowledge rendered her situation no whit less dangerous.

Deborah crept forward over the pile of débris, discovering that this fall of stone did not denote the ending of the passage. She was in intense darkness, no longer able to distinguish even the distant light of the entrance, or any outline of that slumbering figure perched motionless on the stone. Suddenly her groping hands revealed a sharp curvature in the tunnel, and she worked her way about the corner with utmost caution. Then she stopped, rooted to the spot, her heart almost ceasing to beat. Far above, up what appeared to be a sharply inclined chute through the solid rock, came streaming down a single ray of daylight, its faint reflection resting directly upon the upturned face of a dead man, stretched on the tunnel floor.

CHAPTER XVI

THE PASSAGE OUT

DEBORAH, startled, swayed back against the wall for support, staring down into that white, upturned face, clearly revealed within the little pool of light. She had witnessed death so often in most hideous form as to have no doubt the man was beyond help; nor was it any personal fear of the corpse, even in that gloomy spot, which held her rigid. For the instant she seemed to have lost all power of volition, her very brain numbed by this unexpected encounter. It was the face of a young man, his dark, wide-open eyes staring blindly up into vacancy, his brown hair, cut short, almost good-looking even in death, with cheeks freshly shaven. This last was what aroused the girl, brought her back quickly to life and action. He had the appearance of having shaved that very morning; the stubble of his beard was not even visible. Then she noted two other facts—his revolver was in the holster at his waist, and the hand, held upright against the side wall, grasped a folded paper. He had just been killed, not more than two hours before surely, and in no duel—perhaps he had fallen to where he lay while climbing

that narrow passage above. But the wound? There was none visible—not even a bruise on the face. As a woman, Deborah shrank from touching the body, but her training as a nurse instantly conquered. She must learn the truth, disagreeable as the task might be. On her knees, exerting all her strength, she partially turned the body—the man had been shot in the back.

She seemed to comprehend it all in a flash, visioning the scene as she rose quickly to her feet. He must have done the deed—that older man with the beard—shooting treacherously from behind. This younger man had been given no chance, probably did not even suspect his danger, before being struck down. His hand was not even on his gun in any effort at defense; he probably never knew. Perhaps he was climbing the passage up there, seeking for some way of escape from the tunnel, or else merely exploring the narrow hole leading to the bar of light above. He could scarcely have felt suspicion of any other presence, or he never would have been taken so completely by surprise. The other had stolen stealthily through those black shadows behind, and fired at the figure above outlined plainly against that opening. It had been deliberate murder. But the purpose was not so clear. To all appearances the assassin had never even approached his victim after

he fell. Confident of the deadly accuracy of his aim, he had left the inert body lying where it struck, untouched, not even the dead man's gun being removed from its holster, or the folded bit of paper released from those gripping fingers.

The unspeakable, treacherous horror of the act appalled Deborah. There must be some reason behind it all. It was too cold, cruel, deliberative, not to have definite cause. Some quarrel, some jealousy, or long hatred must have led up to this tragic end—or, could it be the deed of insanity? No speculation now could solve the mystery, but the murderer still lived; he was back yonder in the darkness she had just left. He would no more spare her than he had shown mercy to this other victim. If he still slept she must take advantage of the moment for escape—the one chance up that long passage toward the gleam of light at the top. She stepped across the dead body, grasping her skirts tightly in one hand; then hesitated for an instant, obsessed by a new thought. Perhaps that paper might explain it all, might prove the very key to all this mystery. She bent, and wrested it from out the stiffened fingers, hastily endeavoring to learn what it contained. It was a thick, tough sheet, the folds showing yellow and dirty as though it had been carried a long while, and there was writing inside, in fine penmanship, but

so indistinct her eyes were unable to decipher a single word in that dim light. She thrust it into the bosom of her blouse, her eyes anxiously searching the only possible way out.

It scarcely promised even that, as revealed by that single ray barely illuminating the passage. Apparently an irregularly sized hole, worn between layers of solid rock by the action of water, it led upward at a sharp angle, and, while wide enough at the lower extremity to permit the entrance of a full-grown man, seemed to contract at the upper opening so as to make it very doubtful if an ordinary body could squeeze through into the open air beyond. The hole was not smooth, but knobby with projections of stone, to which hand and foot could cling, thus making it possible for one to clamber up safely, but the diameter at the top could only be guessed at from that distance. Yet Deborah felt that she had no choice, but to accept this single chance of deliverance. She could not remain there with the dead man, nor retrace her steps backward to where the murderer remained asleep on guard. Her belt was still about her waist, but its holster was empty; the revolver had either been removed while she was unconscious, or had fallen out during her fierce struggle at the entrance of the mine. Before beginning to climb, she drew the dead man's gun from his scab-

bard, and stuck it into her own. As she did so the light from above glimmered on a pearl-studded handle, and a barrel of blue steel.

At first the climbing was not difficult, the slope gradual with the walls sufficiently wide apart to afford comparatively easy passage. Outcroppings of rock kept her from slipping back, even furnished a sort of ladder up which she climbed. Then the passage narrowed, with a far sharper incline, the center becoming almost as smooth as glass. Deborah was obliged to find support against the irregularity of the sides, drawing herself forward by her hands, with feet groping in the darkness below for any projection against which they could rest. Yet she won her way upward, almost inch by inch, soon creeping over a narrow shelf, able, finally, to sit upright within a shallow niche at one side, where the stone had been hollowed out for a few inches. She was breathless from the hard climb, her heart beating rapidly. Hope almost deserted her as she traced the contracted passage leading from there to the top, a mere round funnel, through which she must actually force her body. The small, contracted opening above appeared impossible.

The girl gazed over into the darkness below. She could see nothing, hear nothing, yet her mind pictured again the dead face of that boy staring up at her—

she could not go back to that! Nor to that other, living horror, beyond! The fellow might be awake by now, seeking her, trailing her back through the tunnel, knowing his crime had been discovered, ready for any brutality rather than permit of her escape. He would seek her here first of all; however desperate the venture, she must go on; better to die there, caught helplessly in that rocky hole, than ever to fall again into the power of that beast. She listened intently, hearing nothing; then lifted her hands to feel upward. The sudden flap of a wing almost struck her face, and a bat scurried up the passage; she could see it shadowed against the gleam of daylight above. The girl laughed nervously, but did not even shrink back. She lifted one foot, seeking a fragment of rock to rest upon. Then a flare of red lit the inferno, a dull, muffled report echoed along the imprisoning walls, and a bullet brushed her hair, flattening itself on the rock beyond.

She shrank back into the little niche, scarcely certain of her escape, and rested there on her knees, not venturing to move. The shot had come from below; of that there could be no doubt, but there was no other report, no movement to reveal any presence. Deborah had no question as to who had fired—it must be the man she had fled from in the outer cave. He must have seen her outlined against that round opening

above. It was a miracle she had escaped; but to have seen her the fellow must have stood directly beneath, beside the body of the dead man. Perhaps he would be there still, peering up to learn the result of his shot, wondering where she had disappeared so quickly. Her pulse had ceased to throb so rapidly, and she felt a strange coolness of action. She was safe enough where she was, behind that barrier of rock, and she drew the pearl-handled revolver out of its holster, and listened eagerly for any sound of guidance from below. If he made any effort to climb up, she meant to shoot to kill.

She dare not venture to advance her face around the rock edge, for fear the movement might bring her into view against that vista of light. She knelt thus, minute after minute, ready, but hearing nothing to guide her. The fellow was evidently waiting and watching just as she was, disconcerted by her strange disappearance. No doubt he half believed his bullet had found its mark, that she had fallen, either wounded, or dead, into some crevice, but was afraid as yet to venture up that narrow tunnel. Yet surely the man would be crouched where he could perceive any movement above him. She could not remain there indefinitely waiting for him to gain courage to attempt the ascent. Her hand, with the weapon in it, reached noiselessly out beyond the

edge of the rock, and pointed downward. A stone rattled below, and her finger pulled the trigger.

The muffled report echoed back from the rocks, the red flash of the discharge faded into darkness, and the pungent smoke blew back into her face; but there was nothing else. No cry, no crunch of a falling body, no thud of lead. She listened helplessly, half crazed, to empty every load from her poised weapon into that silence below. What could it all mean? What had happened behind that black veil? No sound told, and yet she dare not move, might not venture to expose herself against that patch of blue sky above. An hour passed, an hour of dreadful watching, of tense expectation. It seemed to her the blue light streaming through that opening was already losing its power, as though the sun was going down. If she would escape she must go while she could yet see the way. Desperate as the chance was, it must be accepted. Never before had she been so overmastered by physical fear, yet her will conquered, and she ventured out upon the open shelf of rock, and began to clamber slowly up through the shaft of light. She did not look down, or permit herself to think of the possible danger lurking below. With lips closely pressed together, and heart beating rapidly, she drew herself up, inch by inch, bracing her body against the side walls as though in a chimney,

making use of every projection as a support to either hand or foot, and thus steadily approaching the opening overhead. It was a more difficult passage even than she had supposed, almost choked in places by débris. Twice she had to stop, clinging desperately for support, and clear away fragments of rock before she could creep past, the loosened pebbles rolling noisily down the steep slope. Yet her courage had returned; there had been no attack from beneath, no evidence of life.

Deborah reached the end of her climb breathless, her limbs aching from exertion, her heart sinking with dismay. It never could be accomplished, the passage of her body through that narrow opening to the world without. How sweet the fresh air felt; how beautiful the blue arch of sky, yet it was hopeless of attainment. The very madness of the thought proved her salvation. Crazed for the moment, she began to dig fiercely with her fingers at the obstruction, tearing at a projecting point of rock, which suddenly yielded to the furious attack, a stream of loosened sand pouring after. Little by little, madly tearing at the sides of the orifice, she managed to wear away every fragment back to the solid rim of rock. Even then the passage outward of her body appeared almost impossible. She unbelted the revolver, and flung it through the opening; then drew

herself upward, fearful every instant of being irretrievably caught, yet finding purchase below for her feet sufficient to thrust her slender body steadily forward. At last, her shoulders emerged into the outer day, and she was enabled to drag the rest of her body over the rim of rock. Utterly exhausted, Deborah lay on the sand, gasping for breath, conscious only that she had found refuge in a shallow ravine. She lay there outstretched in the shadow of a steep bank, without strength even to lift her head.

CHAPTER XVII

TWO OF A KIND

DEBORAH felt that she never would regain power to rise, yet this total exhaustion passed away, as she began to breathe more easily, and finally she sat upon the sand, gazing about at her strange surroundings, eager to discover what she could attempt next. The desperation of her plight was clear. She had escaped from that hell underground, yet was but little better off than before. She was upon the edge of the desert stretching outward toward the Meager ranch. It would be impossible to cross this on foot, with neither food nor water to sustain her; nor could she for a moment contemplate seeking refuge there, even if it were possible. Her only hope was to circle that hidden chasm, and then endeavor to find her way north until she reached some human habitation. The hope of accomplishing this was the merest mirage; the attempt probably meant death. She knew nothing of the country in that direction, how far the desert stretched, or the dim trails leading through its desolation. She had no horse, no food, yet somehow, in the exhilaration of that first moment of release, she could not wholly

despair. God had been good; she would go on courageously, and trust Him.

She arose to her knees, and looked about. It was a lonely, contracted scene, amid which she was concealed. Some rift in the rocks led down to that opening through which she had just crept. Perhaps it had formed a water course in other ages, but now the sand of the desert had drifted in, and covered all with a yellow mantle of desolation. A few gnarled shrubs clung precariously to the steep banks, while farther back, a bunch of more pretentious bushes hid the upper end of the depression. The sides were too steep to scale even on foot, the loose sand foiling every attempt, so she was compelled to follow the course of the defile in seeking a way out. The sun was well down in the western sky, the little ravine lying largely in shadow, and for the first few yards of advance the girl had no suspicion she was not alone. The patch of sagebrush limited her view, and she was threading her way through these, when the sound of a voice speaking caused her to crouch suddenly down in the midst of the thicket, and lie motionless, scarcely daring to breathe. It was the voice itself which paralyzed her every volition, a voice instantly recognized, never to be forgotten—the voice of Bob Meager.

Her ears caught but a word or two, disconnected

meaningless, an outburst of profanity, and a brutal laugh, yet there could be no possible doubt as to the speaker. It was Meager, rough, coarse as ever. He was not dead then; the blow struck had no more than stunned the man, and—and she was his wife. Deborah's fingers dug at the sand in sudden agony, as that hideous thought came home anew to her mind. She was legally married to that repulsive brute, that foul-mouthed cur; he was there seeking her, had in some way discovered their trail across the desert, and now, actuated by revenge, was seeking to get her once again in his power. She could conceive no other purpose in his relentless pursuit. In some mysterious way he must have discovered what had occurred, suspected that she and Kelleen had ridden away together, and then followed, like an Indian, on the trail. She lifted her head suddenly; another voice spoke quietly, indifferently, interrupting Meager's outburst of profanity as though it had never occurred. Surely, the voice was familiar, it must have been Kelleen himself who spoke.

She crept forward inch by inch, crouching low behind the sage until she could see the figures of the two men. Neither one faced her; Meager sat on the side of the bank, his horse grazing just beyond, while the "Frisco Kid" remained in the saddle, his mount still breathing

heavily as though he had only just arrived after a hard ride.

"Well, what difference does it make?" he asked quietly. "Am I in on this, or not?"

"Of course you're in now," was the surly response. "I reckon that was what caused you to show up in these parts, ain't it? Casebeer squealed, and you got wise to the whole game. I wondered what was being pulled off when you rode in last night. Say, 'Kid,' who really piped it to you—Casebeer or Garrity?"

"The less you know about that the longer you'll live, Bob," Kelleen replied calmly. "It is enough that I do know, not only what you are up to out here, but that it was also your game to double-cross me. I don't take kindly to that sort of thing —"

"This wasn't no part of our deal."

"Well, I say it was; it's Mex war stuff, isn't it, that Casebeer's running through? Who got you a chance at that in the first place?"

He grinned, good-naturedly enough, waiting for the other to reply, then resumed.

"But let that go now. You thought you could throw me, which is an old story. You tried the same game once before, Bob. The scheme has never worked very well. You haven't got the brains to do it with. Casebeer never told me anything; nor Garrity. All I needed

was to know you, and your kind. You were never honest in your life, and when I heard about this deal, it was easy enough to figure what was up. I didn't have to ask any questions of your gang. I came out to see for myself."

"What deal, 'Kid?' What do you mean?"

"This ranch inheritance Garrity fixed up so nicely for you. No, I haven't all the dope—not yet. But I'm on my way to it, all right; the rawest deal I ever heard about, and it will blow up like a punctured balloon, just so soon as your stepmother gets nerve enough to see a good lawyer. That's true, ain't it, Bob?"

"The old man left it to me."

"Yes, he did—not." I was down in old Mex when I first heard what was going on up here. Young Clair got hold of one end of the story somehow, and told it to me. He didn't know very much, only that you and Garrity were hand in glove, and that you were up here running things—you remember Clair?"

"He worked here on the ranch."

"Yes; that's what made him talk. He's square, that kid, and you fired him, and every other American on the place; then put on Mexicans. That made him sore. When he told me that I came pretty near knowing what was up."

"You did, hey! Wanted a hand in the game?"

"Why shouldn't I, Bob? I held you up when you was flat, didn't I? There is no reason why you should forget me now. Damn you! I mean to see that you don't. That's what I'm here for. Now listen—I'm on to what is going to be pulled off tonight—this Casebeer business. It doesn't make any difference how I found that out, or who gave it away. You sent Sanchez and his helper over here to take care of the Casebeer outfit—that's right, isn't it?"

Meager growled something indistinctly, his eyes angrily watchful, but Kelleen remained on guard.

"There is no use playing the hog, Bob," the latter went on coolly. "I've got the cards, and I'm no girl you can play the brute with, like you did last night. Sanchez naturally thought you sent me out here; I told him you did, and he saw me at the ranch last evening. Consequently it was easy enough to find out all he knew. He was supposed to meet you here, but, as you see, I came instead. I thought it might be just as well for us to reach an understanding before Casebeer showed up."

"You damned devil!"

"I appreciate the compliment," smiling ironically, "but I am here to do business, not to exchange felicitations. What time does this outfit come in?"

"Between now and midnight."

"What are they running?"

"War stuff, of course."

"And you have the way cleared—Garrity brought you that information, no doubt. Has he gone back to Nogales?"

"Yes; this morning."

"I see; everything has been attended to. Somebody with brains is engineering this. You and Sanchez do the rough work while the judge clears the trail. All right; I've got it mapped out now. I was afraid the Mexican might be lying to me, but I guess he wasn't. You are really not supposed to be in this deal at all. The Mex takes the stuff across the line, gets your share of the boodle, and brings it back. All you need do is hide out here, and wait. Pretty soft, I'd say."

"Is it? Well, what are you going to do?"

"Play square, Bob. I'm damned if you deserve it, but I'll only take my share. I'll go along with the outfit, though, to make sure I get it. Then we'll split right here. Keep that hand away. You have been edging in toward that gun for the last five minutes. I've got you covered, you sneaking cur. I don't take any chances with your kind. Now are you ready to come clean?"

There was no immediate answer, and Kelleen settled back into his saddle, but still faced the other, who had risen to his feet.

"I came up here half inclined to kill you," the younger man said soberly, "but now I am going to give you a show-down if you play fair. I know you would double-cross anybody if you had a chance. I don't mean to give you any. You stay here until I come back; if you fail, I'll run you down, no matter where you go. You get that?"

"Damn you—yes."

"And you know what that means?"

Meager's fingers clinched and unclinched, his tongue wetting his dry lips.

"You needn't make any promise, Bob. Your word means nothing to me. You stay here until I come back. If you don't, you are as good as dead—that's all. That's my pledge; and you know whether it is good, or not. Anything more you want to say?"

He backed his horse slowly down into the bottom of the gully, turning the animal's head toward the opposite bank, but still twisted in the saddle so as to confront Meager. He had drawn his revolver, and held it carelessly in his hand.

"You are such a dirty, low-down brute," he said coldly, "it would really be a pleasure to put you out of the world. I sometimes wonder why I don't. The Mex tells me you got married last night. Was it the real thing this time?"

"That's none of your damned business."

"Perhaps not, but let's be social while we are together. Partners ought not to quarrel. Surprises me you should desert the fair bride so soon. You seem to have your head wrapped up—couldn't be a love tap, could it?"

Meager's temper obtained full control at this unpleasantry.

"Hell, I was drunk!" he growled viciously. "But she'll pay for it, the next time I get hands on the wench."

"So, she got away then? Lord, Bob, I always thought you was a woman tamer. This one is of another sort, then, than those you are accustomed to handling; doesn't take kindly to the cave-man stuff?"

"She'll take it, all right, the damn little vixen. She hit me when I was drunk, and then got away; hid in the old lady's room, I reckon, for I couldn't find her nowhere. But I'll bring the girl out o' there tonight, by God, an' she won't have no drunk man to deal with neither."

Kelleen laughed, evidently well satisfied with what he had learned, and having no further desire to add to Meager's discomfiture. His restive horse suddenly sprang forward under the quick thrust of the man's heel, crashing through the tangle of sage, and up the

steep bank to the level of the desert above. Deborah had barely time to sink her body lower into the sand behind her covert, when the startled animal swept past, one hoof scarcely missing her. Meager, with an oath, swung a hand back to his pistol butt, yet was already too late—Kelleen had gone over the crest, the faint echo of a laugh floating behind him tantalizingly.

CHAPTER XVIII

MORE COMPLICATIONS

ALL the girl could do was to remain silently where she lay behind that cluster of sage. Had she been seen by either of the men? Did Kelleen catch glimpse of her as his horse dashed up the bank? or had Bob Meager, staring after him, chanced to discover her hiding place? She had no means of knowing, but could only keep her motionless pose like a frightened rabbit. It was already growing dusk, and shadows hung over the gully, becoming deeper with every passing moment. If she had escaped observation so far she would soon be perfectly safe. And she was—she was!

The certainty was like a glass of wine, the blood coming back to her heart, her pulse steadyng. Kelleen had ridden on, never pausing; she could hear the dull thud of his horse's hoofs in the sand, until the sound died away in the distance. And Meager stood there, revolver in hand, cursing impotently; finally leaping forward across the gully to where he could stare out over the edge of the bank toward where his enemy had disappeared. Neither man then had seen her; neither had the slightest conception of her presence, yet she dare not move, or attempt to change position; the

slightest motion might mean betrayal. She shrank even closer in the shadow waiting. Would Meager stay there, or go away? In truth of the two men she dreaded him the least, despising the fellow so thoroughly as to have largely lost her fear. She could face him, fight him, if necessary; he was no more than a cowardly brute, whose measure she had already taken—but Kelleen! She was actually afraid of him. If she had still retained any lingering doubt as to what he was, that doubt had been entirely vanished by this conversation. The man had worn no mask talking with Bob Meager; made no attempt to disguise himself. She recognized him now as thief, and border desperado, no better probably than those he associated with—and far more dangerous.

It seemed to Deborah as though that dimly outlined figure standing at the edge of the bank would never move. The fellow was evidently trying to satisfy himself that Kelleen had really gone, before finally deciding on his own course of action. Darkness was fast shutting down about them like a curtain, and great desert stars began to show overhead. She realized that Meager had slipped his gun back into his holster, and appeared satisfied now that he had been left alone. His actions, and certain muttered words, aroused her interest, and held her in concealment watching his every movement.

The fellow purposed something—but what? Those surely were night glasses through which he searched the horizon, crossing from side to side of the ravine, and lying flat on the sand while sweeping the circle before him inch by inch. Evidently nothing was discovered to awaken suspicion, for he came back to his horse, and loosened a long rope coiled about the saddle pommel, and, with this on his arm, tramped down the gully, within a yard of where she lay, his figure fading almost instantly into the darker shadows below.

At the moment the girl scarcely conceived what his mission might be. Her whole mind seemed to concentrate on the opportunity for escape which his absence offered. If she could attain the horse unnoticed, and once securely vault into the saddle she could be over the bank, and out into the black, noiseless desert almost in an instant. She arose crouching upon her feet, yet hesitated an instant, feeling a sudden curiosity to learn what Meager might be searching for. He could not go far, for the ravine ended abruptly against a rock wall. She had a mental picture of the scene. Good God! could the man be seeking after that narrow opening through which she had just escaped? Could it be possible he knew of its presence there? Where it led? the secret of that mysterious tunnel in the cliff?

If that was not his mission what could he be doing

now? Why was he so secretive? The whole affair fascinated her—that strange, hidden mine with the dead man lying in the black passage, and its long-bearded, ape-armed guard, peering vigilantly through the vines. Were they all connected together—part of some criminal conspiracy, into the vortex of which she had been innocently drawn? The opportunity to escape was now open; Meager had entirely disappeared in the darkness; she could no longer even distinguish the sound of the man's movements, while his horse, saddled and bridled, stood unguarded not a dozen yards away. Yet the girl lingered, waiting to assure herself as to the real nature of the fellow's mission. She no longer thought of who he was—her husband; but only of his purpose in that place.

Forth from the darkness to her strained ears came the sound of a low whistle, a peculiar note resembling the call of a wild bird, quite evidently a signal, as it was repeated three times. To Deborah's imagination the whistler must be bending above the orifice in the rock. There was a pause, the desert silence profound, and then again the same signal impatiently given. Apparently there was no response of any nature from below, and Meager lost control of his caution, for he burst forth in a string of oaths, ending this tirade by calling down into the hole, his voice muffled as though he had inserted

his head as far as possible within the narrow opening. The words came back indistinct, occasionally lost.

"Below there! you Manuel! Answer me, you damn dog! This is Bob; do you hear? By God, the fool must be asleep. I'll skin you alive if you fail me now. What the hell does this mean?"

He apparently stood up, or at least lifted his head from out the aperture, for the voice sounded clearer to Deborah. The change startled her so she sprang to her feet, ready for escape before he could return, yet waited another instant, breathless, poised for flight.

"Damn the luck!" growled Meager to himself, unconsciously aloud, "when I want the fool he fails me. By God! something must be wrong, but what the hell can I do? I got to find out what's up—that's sure; an' there ain't but one way o' doin' it; I got to git down below, an' damn quick too, before Casebeer gits here."

Deborah paused no longer. He was coming back; there was no other way if he intended going down the cliff. She ran swiftly through the dark, reckless of the scraggy sage, desperate to attain the horse. The man must have heard her, had some intimation of movement in the black night, for he gave utterance to a startled oath, and his feet crunched in the sand. But he was already too late, too far behind. In a moment more the frightened girl had gripped the bridle rein,

flinging it back over the animal's head, and, in spite of his backing away, startled by her sudden appearance, had, in sheer desperation of terror, scrambled into the saddle. The horse wheeled sharply about, maddened by the flap of her skirt, and leaped forward, straight across the gully, and up the sharp incline opposite. She clung tight to the pommel, lying almost flat, letting him bear her where he would. Her eyes caught one glimpse of the man's figure, dim, indistinct, grotesque, racing toward them; then he fired twice, the red glare lighting up the night. The next instant they were over the top, speeding frantically into the inky blackness of the desert night, no sound but the slugging of the animal's hoofs in the soft sand.

A hundred yards, and she sat up in the saddle, reining her frightened horse in, and staring back through the dark curtain. She had escaped, she was free! Nothing else mattered. Meager's hasty shots had failed; neither she nor the horse had been touched. Now he was back there helpless on foot, while she was free, and in saddle. But where should she ride? in which direction? where was safety to be found before daylight? She drew the horse down to a walk, and studied the stars overhead in an endeavor to determine even the points of the compass. Her heart seemed to stop beating; how lonely it all was, how deadly quiet, and desolate.

Was that a sound—there to her left? She stared, half conscious of a deeper shadow looming, yet uncertain, checking the sudden spring of her horse. Then she knew, but too late; the black thunderbolt rushed upon her, and a man, leaning from his saddle, had clasped her arm, even as he jerked his own mount almost on its haunches.

“No shooting, please!” a voice said a bit sternly.
“It is you, then?”

She suppressed the scream which almost escaped her lips, but her answer faltered.

“You thought it was I then? You were seeking after me?”

“Of course; people scarcely meet by chance here—in this desert and darkness.”

“But why, may I ask, should we meet by either chance, or otherwise?”

“Inclination may have had something to do with that, and a desire to serve. Am I not somewhat responsible in your case?”

“I do not care to acknowledge any such responsibility. I prefer now to go my own way alone. Do you understand?”

“You mean those words just as they sound?” he asked, releasing his grasp on her arm, yet only lowering his hand to her horse’s rein.

"The words certainly express my meaning exactly, Mr. Kelleen. Why do you retain hold of that rein?"

"To prevent any attempt on your part to ride away," he acknowledged, a slight coldness in his tone, "at least until we understand each other better. I had up to this minute supposed you were endeavoring to escape from that fellow back yonder; now I learn you were running away from me also. Is that the truth?"

She hesitated; then courage returned.

"I fear you more even than I do Bob Meager," she answered honestly, "and despise you more."

"That is a pleasant statement. I wonder if I really deserve it? You think I deserted you? left you unnecessarily? First listen to my explanation—yes, you must; I shall not let you go until you do." He laughed rather bitterly. "Really it surprises me that I take all this trouble. I have never been termed a ladies' man, or cared particularly as to how I stood in their estimation. But I deliberately started out to help you, and you are not going to act the fool now, if I can prevent it. Will you listen to me?"

"I know of no way to avoid doing so; but I prefer that you release my horse."

He was resting over his pommel endeavoring to see her features through the gloom. Then his fingers relaxed their hold on the rein, and he straightened up

facing her. They were two indistinct figures, barely discernible.

"I trust you," he said simply. "You are better mounted than I, and armed, but I will not believe you look upon me altogether as a villain. You had confidence in me last night—did you not?"

"Yes—last night. I was desperate, afraid, and—and I accepted all you told me."

"I am the same man now," he said earnestly. "I am Daniel Kelleen, just as ready to prove my friendship now as then. You do not believe that?"

"No, I do not; I cannot. You insist on knowing why? There is no reason why I should not explain what has made the difference. Last night I accepted your assistance from necessity. I had to escape that ranch before daylight, and you offered the only chance. I—I did not know who you were then—only—only in a vague way. I rather accepted you as an American cowboy, and—and you made me trust you."

"During our night ride, you mean?"

"Yes, you told me a little about yourself; perhaps it was not true, but you made me think it was, and I gained confidence in you in spite—in spite of your—your reputation."

"I see—the 'Frisco Kid' business. That was a little off color, wasn't it? If I remember right you got

my history principally from 'Pop' Reynolds, with all embellishments thrown in. Yet, nevertheless, you managed to like me? Is that it?"

"I had to trust you then. I tried to believe all you told me, and—and you were nice."

"Good enough; and then what?"

"It was not because you left me. I thought I understood that; you were seeking to save me from discovery. Yet even then I was not sure, not as confident in you as when we were alone together. I—I began to doubt, to desire to get away from you. Sanchez was too friendly, too willing to acknowledge your leadership, and obey your orders—and—and you knew too much about what was going on here."

"I did some pretty shrewd guessing, that's true," he said soberly. "I knew enough for that, at least; all Sanchez knew of me was my name, and that I was supposed to be a friend of Meager's. He saw me over at the ranch, and I bluffed all the rest through."

"He knew you as 'Frisco Kid?'"

"Of course. It was that individual's reputation which won his loyalty."

"So I supposed. And I am beginning to believe justly," Deborah said coldly. "You told me a very interesting story, Mr. Daniel Kelleen, which I know now to be false."

CHAPTER XIX

KELLEEN BECOMES MASTER

KELLEEN made no movement, and for the moment no answer. He had anticipated this outburst, yet was not quite prepared to meet it. Her voice spoke again.

"You have lied to me, haven't you?"

"I prefer learning first why you reach this conclusion," he replied calmly. "Does it come from my conversation with Juan Sanchez?"

"It began there. I could scarcely help suspecting you after listening to what you had to say to that Mexican outlaw. Besides, he discussed you quite freely with his companion in my hearing before you returned. When you did come all you had to say to them only confirmed his statement—you are out here not so much in my protection, but as the representative of Bob Meager. I am merely your plaything en route."

"You are indeed complimentary. Did I serve Meager, you think by running off with his wife?"

"There is no law, or decency on this border where any woman is concerned," she burst out bitterly. "I

have at least learned that. I do not know your real object; only that you are one of this disreputable gang; that you came here to serve its purposes; that I was therefore only an incident—to be lied to, and laughed at."

"You reached this conclusion from what you overheard of the talk between Sanchez and myself? Of course I knew you were there."

"Exactly, and did not even care. Your very insolence was an insult. You believed me then entirely in your power. I had fled with you into the desert. You thought there was no escape possible—that I was already compromised, helpless. You could sit calmly there on your horse, laugh and sneer, and I dare do nothing to protect myself. Then you rode off, and left me—your last glance one of insolent triumph. It was then I fully realized that I was only your victim. I was afraid of you, and I hated you then."

His voice was very low, very quiet.

"You lost all faith? You attempted to run away, and hide from me before I could return?"

"I attempted to get away—yes. I could not remain there; it would even be better to die on the desert. But—but I am not wholly sure I had lost all faith. Nothing was quite clear, but—but I was afraid of you. You had lied to me; I could not trust myself alone with

you any longer. But since then I have lost all faith—do you know why?"

"I can make a guess. You also overheard the talk between myself and Bob Meager."

"Every word. How did you know?"

"Because I had glimpse of you as my horse topped the bank. I had sought you everywhere after I finally got rid of Sanchez. The truth is I was still seeking your trail when I encountered Bob skulking there in the gully. Our meeting was not prearranged; it was an accident. Were you there when we first came together?"

"No; which is quite fortunate for your story; it gives sufficient scope to your imagination. There was nothing said after I crept within hearing at least to show any serious lack of friendship between you. You talked like partners; and it was not for my sake surely, for neither one had any conception that I was within ear-shot. That is true, isn't it?"

"Yes," Kelleen acknowledged. "It is true so far as it goes. You are perfectly justified in condemning me, as the facts stand in your mind. I am not even going to attempt defending myself. I fear it would be useless. I am merely going to serve you, whether you wish to be served or not. But listen a minute before you cast me off utterly. Will you do that?"

The girl hesitated, biting her lips, angered by his insistence.

"I cannot very well help listening; I doubt if I believe."

"Believe or not, as you damn please," he broke forth impatiently. "This is no time, or place in which to play. I've made up my mind what to do, however you decide—only I'd rather you put some faith in me. It would be easier, and pleasanter for both of us. The truth is I have been white with you—square. I came here seeking refuge just exactly as I explained to you last night. I knew this was a thieves' hole, of course, but had no suspicion that we were going to run into their outfit at this time. But when we did, I had to act along with them. There was no other way. I had you to consider, and I had something else to consider. I lied to them, not to you—to both Sanchez and Bob Meager. They are going to get the surprise of their lives tonight. Now listen. I came back there for you; I tried to trace you all the afternoon. I do not know how you hid your trail, but there was none to be found. Where did you go?"

"That is my secret."

"And you mean to keep it from me? Well, I knew you couldn't be far away, because you had not taken the horse. Finally I decided you must have climbed the

cliff on foot, and I came up, and ran into Meager. Neither of us was very happy about it, but I had some knowledge of what was on foot from Sanchez. Only Bob wasn't there for that purpose; he pretended to be, but he had something else up his sleeve. You don't know what he was really up to, do you?"

"No," she said quickly, not willing yet to tell her tale, "why should I?"

Kelleen went on, undiscouraged.

"I didn't know how long you were hiding there. I only caught that glimpse of you as I rode away, crouched down behind the sagebrush. But that is why I came back."

"Because you saw me?"

"Yes; and because I believed Bob was up to some trick. I even had reason to suspect, did I not, that you two might be there together?"

She faced him indignantly, sitting straight in her saddle.

"You thought I would secretly meet him?"

"Why not? You evidently believe every evil of me. How did I know you had told the truth? You are his wife, by your own statement. Why shouldn't I suspect, finding you there together? Anyhow I went back to discover the truth. That is why I am here with you now."

"Believing what of me?"

"I hardly know—except not that. You were not with him, yet that is his horse you are riding. He fired at you, did he not?"

"Yes; he went past me down the gully after you left. It was dark then, and I was not seen. He had no knowledge of my presence. Then I stole his horse and rode away. I doubt if he even knew it was a woman he shot at."

The listlessness suddenly left her voice.

"But I am not going with you," she went on coldly. "If you are a man you will not try to urge me. I trusted you last night, but not now. I am not afraid of the night, or the desert."

"And you are afraid of me?"

"I am not your kind, Mister 'Frisco Kid;' that is all the answer I need make you. Will you let me go?"

"Where?"

"I'll find my way; I have a horse, and the stars. By morning I'll be in sight of some point of guidance. Anyhow if the choice is between the cruel desert and you, I take the desert. Am I free to go?"

Kelleen laughed.

"You leave it to me then? Well, I say you are not going. I am not the sort of cur who would let you commit suicide just because you have taken a dislike to

me. You would be lost in ten minutes; you don't know this country—it's treacherous as hell. Now listen; you are going to trust me whether you wish to, or not. You needn't like me—that cuts no ice in this affair—but you are going to learn that when I give my word to either man or woman, I'm going to keep it. Now, that's flat. If you want to go back to Bob Meager, all right. I'll take you to him, and we're done. But when you talk of my turning you loose in this desert, to take your chances out there alone, I am the wrong kind of man for any such job. You can hate me all you please, but we stick together, until I get you where there are white folks."

"I believe I do hate you!"

"All right; I don't mind that. Will you do what I tell you to do?"

The man waited, leaning slightly forward, seeking vainly to distinguish the girl's features. There was no sound but the slight creaking of their saddles, and the breathing of the two horses. They were alone in the great void. He had spoken quickly, almost harshly, and the tone of command had aroused Deborah's resentment. The two wills clashed, and neither would give way, or seek compromise. Deep down in her secret heart a bit of faith in this Daniel Kelleen yet lingered, but she was in no mood then to acknowledge it. He was

threatening her; trying to frighten her; endeavoring to force her into his power and she resented it immeasurably.

"No, I will not," she said sharply. "Take your hand off my bridle rein!"

She struck her mount suddenly, and the startled animal sprang forward, whirling sidewise from the blow, careening against the flank of Kelleen's horse as it swept swiftly past. The next instant the wild race was on through the black night. She heard the man call to her, but the words were indistinguishable; then from behind came the crunch of his horse's hoofs in mad pursuit. And he was gaining, in spite of every effort. She rode recklessly, desperately, lashing her mount with the flapping end of her reins, yet, leap by leap, Kelleen drew closer, riding as he often had before in heading off a wild stampede of cattle, pressing her horse more and more to the right, into a half-circle as he drew near. He had but one aim, one purpose, and his spurs drew blood as he compelled the animal he rode to give its last ounce of strength to the race. Inch by inch they drew closer together, the girl's skirt flapping against his leg; then his iron grip closed on the bit of her horse, and the two animals came to a stop, pawing the air, Deborah retaining her seat only by clinging to the saddle pommel. She was breathless, frightened, angry;

but the man was conqueror, and in no mood for compromise.

"You fool! do you know where you were going?" he exclaimed sternly. "Straight to the edge of that hole; a dozen strides more and you would have been over. By God! I got you in time, but that is the last trick you'll play on me."

"You—you dare speak to me like that—you?"

The man laughed grimly, the nervous reaction thus finding unconscious expression.

"Dare? I'll say I dare. What else could I call you? You didn't even know what direction you were going, and headed straight for a five hundred foot drop. Now, listen; from now on I am master, and I'll begin right here."

He jerked the revolver from out the holster at her waist, and thrust it into his own belt. The significance of the action robbed the girl of all defiance; she suddenly felt weak, helpless.

"You—you mean I must do whatever you say?"

"Exactly that. You came to me at first voluntarily; you asked my help. I brought you here, and I am going to take you out safely. You are at liberty to hate me, or like me, as you please. I am not asking anything but obedience. I tried being a man with you, and it failed to work; now I'll try being a brute, and see what happens."

He straightened up in his saddle, evidently startled by something in the distance. She could barely distinguish his figure in the gloom, yet knew that his unoccupied hand was pointing to the right.

"Do you see that?" he asked, his voice tense, and eager. "Down below there—that dull red light? It's Casebeer's outfit coming in."

CHAPTER XX

TALKING IT OVER

HE stared down at the red glimmer uncomprehending, her mind still agitated by Kelleen's sudden forcefulness. At first the light seemed to move, to approach slowly, and then to stop. Deborah thought she could perceive figures passing back and forth within its radius.

"Is—is that down in the gulch?" she asked, the very silence a burden.

He answered without glancing about.

"Yes, just below the turn; there is a small cabin there. But I cannot quite make out what the fellows are actually up to. The trail leads straight on, but they seem to be unloading the mules. Does it look so to you?"

The girl did not reply, unable to distinguish clearly, her mind, in reality, more intent on this man sitting beside her than upon that indistinct scene presented beneath. He had seemingly forgotten her very presence, so deeply interested was he in what was transpiring below, leaning eagerly forward, with eyes never deserting the group now showing vaguely within the reddish

glare of the fire, which illumined that little section of the gulch at their feet. Its faint reflection even enabled her to mark the stern outlines of his face against the far-away radiance. Her hostility to the man somehow seemed slipping away. She could not understand what it was which held her there quiet, silent, watching him. The temptation to act came, and passed. It would be easy to snatch that loaded gun from his belt; a single shot would set her free. He was no longer thinking of her; his whole attention was concentrated on that outfit working below. Yet she did not move; just sat there in the saddle, and watched him, wondering at herself. At last a sudden uncontrollable impulse caused Deborah to stretch out her hand, and grasp his sleeve.

"Who are you?" she asked directly. "You must tell me."

The man turned his face toward her quickly, impatiently, their leveled eyes meeting in the dim light.

"I have already told you," he replied, with no marked surprise in his tone. "I trusted you that far; but you chose to disbelieve."

"But can you blame me if I did?" she exclaimed almost passionately, disturbed once more by his apparent indifference. "It was merely your word pitted against all these others; against everything that has occurred before and since. You are not just. Do you remember

the things I have heard said about you—about the 'Frisco Kid'—before I ever saw you? Stories of crime, of reckless murder, of everything despicable? In my mind you ranked as the most desperately bad man of this border, with a price on your head. If I had known who you were back at the ranch, I should never have ridden a mile with you, not even to escape from Bob Meager, or a charge of having killed him."

"Go on," he said soberly, as she stopped breathless.
"Let's have this out; there is no better time."

"I never knew until morning; until I finally recognized you. Then you told me that story—told it so I almost believed it true, almost trusted you. Really I had to believe, or pretend to believe, for I was there alone with you, helpless to protect myself, unable to escape. I was lost in the desert. Then you talked with that Mexican cutthroat, where I could hear all you said. He accepted you as one of the gang, and even obeyed your orders. He believed Bob Meager had sent you out here. You were certainly lying to someone, and naturally I supposed it must be me."

"Why you, may I ask?"

"Because the Mexican knew you; I didn't. I was only a woman you had picked up by accident the night before. There was every reason why you should lie to me. When you rode away together, I was sure you

would soon be back alone, and I determined you should never find me there. I made my choice—it was the desert and death, rather than you. You understand what I mean, Daniel Kelleen?"

"Yes, I understand," quietly. "Go on, let's have it all."

"Then up above, in that little gully, I ran onto you again, it makes no difference how I happened to be there. It was hours later; I had some time in which to think, and began to wonder if my decision had been right. Perhaps you were deceiving Sanchez, hoping thus better to serve me. I did not know; I doubted everything. Then, in the gathering dark, I crept through that patch of sagebrush, and found you in private conference with Bob Meager. You were surely not playing a part then, for you had no knowledge you were being overheard. Yet you were extremely friendly, you even claimed to be partners—it was the very word used—in this Casebeer affair, and you finally rode away to perform your part of the night's work. After that how could I still retain faith in you? or trust myself with you?"

Kelleen did not answer directly, his gaze leaving her face and turning inquiringly to the strange scene revealed below. He stared at this a moment in moody silence. Then he swung down from the saddle, dropped

the rein over the horse's head, and stood beside her.

"I am going to tell you," he said calmly, "if you consent to listen. I think we have ample time to talk this over. I don't know just what those fellows are up to down there, but apparently they are unloading the entire outfit. The only thing I can do therefore is sit here and watch the operation — this is a new deal. Will you trust me enough to dismount?"

There was something about the man, his quiet confidence, his low, even voice, his entire personality, which Deborah found impossible to resist. She earnestly wanted to believe in him, and somehow his very presence restored to her a measure of faith. Hesitating an instant, even shrinking back from any personal contact, her lips refusing a direct answer, she yet permitted his hand to close firmly over her own, and draw her down from the security of the saddle to the common level of the desert sand. Without a word of urging, or explanation, Kelleen led her forward to the very edge of the cliff, where an exposed rock, swept bare by the wind, gave them a seat. Directly beneath lay the narrow valley, dimly lighted by that single fire, about which black dots constantly moved, too far away to be clearly visible. Occasionally the faint echo of a voice reached them, but not distinguishable. It was like a scene thrown upon a screen. Kelleen dropped down beside her,

peering first over into the depths, the flicker of the distant flame barely illumining his face. She could not help but mark its strong outline.

"You really do not understand what is being done down there?" she asked at last, as he held silent.

"I do not." He glanced aside at her, the trace of a smile on his lips. "In spite of my being so important a part in this conspiracy, I am wholly at sea. If you will only believe that to be true, Miss Deborah, we shall be a lot closer to understanding each other. There is something going on here quite beyond me. I had supposed this was a plain case of smuggling war munitions over the line into Mexico. But it isn't. I have been down there, and trailed every foot of that ground. Casebeer's outfit must have come in through that lower pass yonder—beyond the clump of trees," extending his hand, "and the only feasible way to the border lies up the opposite ravine, directly behind the cabin. All they would require here is water for the stock, and a guide. That was to be Sanchez' job. He was to assure them that the way ahead was open, unguarded, and lead them over the safe trail. They need all the rest of the night to make it in."

"But—but they are unloading the mules."

"That is exactly what they are doing—all of them; and taking the stuff back into the cabin. They are not

going on at all; they are going back unloaded. Now what does it mean? Why did Sanchez lie to me about it? and Bob Meager?"

Deborah sat up straight.

"Why shouldn't they lie to you?" she asked quickly.
"If you are really what you pretend to be to me?"

"Because they have no suspicion—they can have none. Not a thing has occurred to arouse such doubt. The game has been played too carefully. It's not that. Meager is endeavoring to double-cross me; I learned that up yonder, but, nevertheless he has not the faintest suspicion as yet that I am not one of his kind. The fellow, together with Garrity, is pulling off something here out of the ordinary, which they want to keep me out of—that's all. It's a thieves' game, which I have butted into at the wrong moment."

He stopped suddenly; then turned, and placed his hand firmly on her own where it rested on the rock surface, his voice changing.

"Miss Deborah, there is no masquerade between us. I do not know why I talked to you as freely as I did last night. I must have liked you very much, and trusted you. Anyhow I told you the exact truth, and there is no occasion now to deny it. The more fully you understand the situation the greater service you can render—and, first of all, you must repose confidence in me. I

am Daniel Kelleen, a captain in the regular army, who has volunteered for special scouting detail to stop this border work. The character of the 'Frisco Kid' has been made to order, to permit of my thus gaining the confidence of these outlaws. It has worked, and I am absolutely sure, even now, that I am not suspected by any of the gang. The whisper reached me a week ago that munitions were being run through here—that Bob Meager's outfit was doing it; that this was the leak we had been unable to stop. I came up to Nogales; hung around there in the lowest quarters of the town, picking up stray bits of rumor. Finally I heard about Garrity, learned he was going out to the Meager ranch. His henchman spilt a little, leaving me to believe there was going to be a run made across the line this week—this Casebeer outfit. That's why I came out; that's how Garrity picked me up at Silver Springs, and I rode on with him to Meager's."

"And that is why you brought me to this dreadful place?"

"I was trying to accomplish two things at once—yes; but, frankly I do not know where else I could possibly have taken you in any safety. I didn't know they were already here, but I was prepared for them—if they went on to the border."

"Prepared? how?"

She was deeply interested now, impressed by his earnestness.

"I had sent word to our people from Nogales. There is a narrow pass through the hills on the trail below, which this outfit must use just before they cross into Mexico. There is no other way south leading from here. Early this evening a squad of cavalry got there from the north, and are waiting."

"And if the outfit they are watching for do not show up tonight, or early tomorrow, what will those soldiers do?"

"Hard to tell. My judgment would be to scout up this way, and endeavor to find out the trouble. This halt here has knocked out my plans completely; my guess at the game has gone wrong. As it is I have the choice of two things—either remain here, and learn what these birds are really up to; or else ride south, bring those troopers back, and round up this entire outfit on general principles. I'd like most of all to discover where Meager is."

"Perhaps I can help you."

"You?" lightly. "I hardly believe so."

"Don't be so sure; I have a story to tell you yet."

Deborah spoke rapidly, clearly, depicting her experiences in the concealed tunnel, her escape up the narrow passage leading to the desert level, how she came to be

hidden in the gully, and what had occurred there after Kelleen had ridden away. The captain listened eagerly to her recital of adventure, interrupting the narrative with numerous questions. As she came to an end he sat silent, endeavoring to think the strange situation out, and grasp its meaning. This fresh knowledge brought a new element into the affair, complicating the whole matter. The red flame of the fire below still cast its faint reflection over them, and it was quite evident the men at work down there had not yet completed their task.

"You say this was a tunnel?" he asked finally. "Dug out, you mean?"

"The light was too poor for me to tell very much. I thought at the time it might be an ancient watercourse, but work had certainly been done on it. I found a pick and shovel on a heap of loosened rock. Quite a pile of broken stone lay at the farther end, as though it might have been blasted from the wall. I had to climb over it."

Kelleen drew a long breath, his hand smiting his knee in sudden conviction.

"By God!" he said slowly. "I believe it must be the 'Lost Mine.' Meager may have found it, and is trying to keep it to himself."

CHAPTER XXI

ALONE ON THE DESERT

“THE ‘Lost Mine?’”

“Yes; it is a tradition of this country, an old Spanish legend, I believe, but implicitly believed for a hundred years. Men by scores have lost their lives hunting for it from one end of this desert to the other. I heard it talked about more than five years ago, when I was first sent out here from the Point. The story goes that it was fabulously rich, discovered by a Spanish explorer, who carried samples of ore clear to Mexico City. He came there twice with laden mules, but refused all definite information, and the men he took back with him as helpers were never permitted to go beyond the edge of the desert. He would then go in alone, and bring out the ore, a muleload at a time. No one ever tracked him; the only one who made any serious attempt to do so, was found dead. Then one day the discoverer failed to return to camp. He never did come back, and no trace of him was ever found. His name was Alvara, and ever since men have been hunting after ‘Alvara’s Lost Mine.’”

“And it was actually here?”

"It must have been; the old Mexican camp was south there in that canyon where I told you the cavalrymen were waiting tonight. I have had the spot pointed out to me by Mexicans who knew the story well. I am beginning to understand what is up—or, at least, suspect what all this may mean. Someone has accidentally stumbled onto this old mine. I don't believe the discoverer could be either Bob, or Garrity. But in some way they got wind of it, and have taken possession. This munition train, supposed to be headed for Mexico, stops here. Casebeer don't know what's up, and don't care. He gets his money just the same, with less traveling and danger. Maybe he asks no questions; maybe he knows what's up, and is in on the deal. Anyway, under orders, he dumps the stuff—powder, dynamite, whatever it is—and hustles it out of sight into that cabin. Before daylight comes, his mule train is back again on the desert empty, traveling north."

"And there is nothing you can do, is there?" she asked. "It is no crime to discover, and work a mine?"

"No—only, perhaps, that dead man you tell me about; murder is still a crime, even on this border. There is something about this affair which isn't straight; otherwise Garrity and Bob Meager wouldn't be in it. Those guys are playing dirt somehow—it is up to me to find out how."

Kelleen stood up, advancing to the very edge of the flat rock, where he could look straight down into the deep depression below. The cliffs were faintly tinted red by the flames of the distant fire, and his figure was rather distinctly silhouetted against the upper sky. Deborah called out to him in warning, but he only smiled back carelessly.

"There's no danger," he said confidently. "The sky back of me is as black as ink. I can't be seen from down below."

He leaned over, scanning the rock front, and speaking back across his shoulder.

"There is no movement down there. Casebeer's outfit is not onto the scheme; after they go that stuff will all be carried into the tunnel. Meager will never dare leave it out yonder."

"What's that place called where the soldiers are?"

"Box Canyon—why?"

"I was wondering——"

A sharp spit of fire leaped out of the night beyond the horses, accompanied by a dull report. The startled animals whirled and disappeared in the darkness, but Deborah saw only Kelleen, poised there on the edge of the chasm—saw him fling up both hands, clutching vainly at the air, and then topple over, down into those yawning depths below. She could not even scream, but

some irresistible instinct caused her instantly to roll back from off the stone into the slight depression at its base. In the black darkness of this shallow hole she lay motionless, scarcely venturing to breathe. In her fright and daze she yet comprehended all that had occurred; the shot had come not from beneath, but out of the desert. Kelleen had been killed, the horses stampeded; she was unhurt, but alone.

It was all over so quickly, the situation barely flashed through her brain, before a voice spoke, a voice familiar and hated.

"By God, that got him! Did you see how he toppled plumb over the cliff? That settles his spying on us, I reckon."

"*Si, señor*; but I would swear there was two of them there."

"You saw two?"

"No; only the one standing against the light, the *Señor 'Kid.'* I know him; but I thought he spoke, and sure, *señor*, there were two horses."

"Of course, he stole mine. I had a shot at him then; but there is no one else here. Damn you, look for yourself, Sanchez! This rock is clean as a billiard table, and there's no place to hide. Where the hell do you suppose those broncs went?"

"We find 'em when the day comes; they not go far

in the desert, señor. Where the 'Kid' fall—here?"

Deborah realized that the Mexican had clambered onto the flat top of the rock, and was peering down over the edge, while Meager remained on the sand, impatiently moving about.

"Well, what do you see?" he barked finally.

"Not one damn thing, señor; black like hell down there—he no live after that."

Meager laughed, chucklingly.

"I'll say he couldn't; not even if he was a cat. There ain't no use our hanging round here. That guy is out of the way, and we'll pick him up an' plant him, after these others clear out. Casebeer's outfit must be through by this time. Go on down, and start 'em back. You paid him?"

"*Si*, señor; he never unload till I do; he what you call 'hard-boil.'"

"He's hard-boiled, all right, but by God, he's got to hold his damn tongue over this deal! I'll go on down with you, and have a final word with him. I'll tell that guy something he'll not forget. Come on; there's nothing more for us to do up here."

The frightened girl, crushed into the shallow hole, half beneath the shadowing rock, dare not stir for some time. The men might decide to return; some dim suspicion might enter their minds, causing them to retrace

their steps. She could see nothing, her face pressed hard against the sand, and the sound of the two died away quickly. At last, unable to remain in that posture longer, she cautiously lifted her head, and gazed about into the darkness. There was nothing to be seen, or heard, and she finally struggled to her feet, clinging to the rock edge for support. It was all plain enough, yet she could not seem to think clearly, and her limbs were so weak they would scarcely support her body. Kelleen had been killed, murdered. Meager had crept up in the dark, and shot the man down in cold blood as he stood silhouetted against that gleam of fire. The victim had toppled over the cliff, and, if not already dead from the bullet, must have been crushed into pulp on the rocks below.

These facts came home more and more visibly to the girl's mind. She had escaped discovery as by a miracle, and yet to what end? She was alone, lost, without either horse or weapon to aid her in escape. Both animals had disappeared in the desert night, her revolver had gone down with Kelleen. But one slender bit of fortune remained — her presence there was still unsuspected. The man, whose discovery she had most reason to dread, yet believed her back at the ranch, hiding from him behind locked doors, but helpless to escape his return. How she had ever evaded his recognition,

was a mystery, yet, thank God! she had; and this fact alone gave her a slender chance.

Assured at last that the men had really departed, a measure of strength returning as she moved her limbs, and faced the realities, Deborah crept back upon the flat surface of the rock, and gazed frightened into those dizzy depths below. It was like a nightmare, the horrid memory which haunted her of Kelleen's body whirling down through that glare of red light. But by then the light had faded, the distant fire having died down to red ash, and her eyes were unable to penetrate the gloom beneath. She stared into a black void, seeing no movement, hearing no sound. The awful silence, and loneliness crushed her spirit.

What could she do? where could she go? Not to those men there in the valley surely; not to Bob Meager, asking for mercy and release. He was impossible; her bitter hatred of him more intense than ever. To all the wrong done her in the past was added now this brutal murder of Daniel Kelleen—and suddenly, unexpectedly, the girl realized what this last meant to her. She refused to acknowledge the truth, fought it back there alone in the darkness, yet it would not be altogether ignored. Daniel Kelleen was dead—gone from out her life forever—and there came into her heart a desire for revenge, a mad impulse to fitly punish the

murderer. She longed to become the instrument to prove her loyalty to him by action. Yet how? What was it possible for her to do?

She stared helplessly about into the dense blackness of the desert, and up at the desert stars overhead, her mind obsessed with these questions. It was no longer herself so much as the aroused memory of him. She would carry on his work; she must at whatever cost. But how? The cavalrymen stationed at Box Canyon! They were waiting for the approach of Casebeer's outfit, or else some word of command from Kelleen. They could not be far away over there—to the south he said, and he had pointed in that direction. The stars would help her to keep the points of compass until daylight came, and then surely she could discern something else to steer her course by. She must go on foot, straight out into the desert; there might not be one chance in a hundred of her going right—yet the one chance was better than remaining there for Bob Meager to find her. She would rather die miserably in the sand waste than feel that wretch touch her again; God, yes, the kiss of Death would be sweet, compared to the touch of his lips. She shuddered at the thought. His wife! the subject of his foul caresses; helpless to repel his lust, his brutal bestiality. She would make the trail; she would go south. This was all that her mind grasped

clearly—the soldiers were camped at Box Canyon, and Box Canyon was somewhere out there to the southward. To reach them was her only hope.

She stood up and studied the sky. She knew so little of those stars, they frightened and confused her in their desert brilliancy, and yet she remembered enough to meet her immediate needs. The Big Dipper was easily found, and then the North Star. She must be right for Kelleen had pointed over there, and the direction he had designated coincided exactly with what the stars told. She could not go far wrong if she kept that North Star at her back—she would be going south. A moment she paused, hesitating to take the plunge, a prayer on her lips. How lonely, desolate, black the night was; the very silence seemed to hem her in, isolate her from all the world. Then, with firm-set lips, the girl went forward, plunging her way through the sand, instantly swallowed up in the black desert.

She plunged on recklessly, desperately, hope dying within her as she advanced. Nothing could guide her now, or save her, but God's mercy. The soundless void through which she moved, the impenetrable black curtain enveloping her almost drove her mad. She could not fight the depression, or keep her mind clear. The sand shifted under her feet and twice she fell heavily, tripped by some protruding rock, and left bruised and

breathless. Her advance was blind, uncertain, and she scarcely dared turn her face forward for fear of losing the guidance of that one star by which she endeavored to steer. She was lost utterly, but for that, and, when, for a moment, her eyes strayed, everything became confused, her every sense of direction gone. How long she toiled on, how fast her rate of progress, the girl never knew—the way was uneven, with unexpected depressions here and there, and ridges of rock projecting through the sand, and occasionally mounds she had to go around. Once she encountered a shallow ravine, stepping off into it unconsciously, and then crawling painfully up the opposite side, cut by sharp splinters of stone, before attaining the level again. For the moment she lost her star, but finally located it once more, and plunged desperately on.

Then she saw something just ahead of her—a dim, undefinable shadow, which seemed to move. It was so hideous, so grotesque, and shapeless, her very heart stood still with terror. The girl sank to her knees, trembling, with no eyes for anything except that mysterious moving object. Misshapen, huge, looming oddly through the gloom, it was advancing steadily toward her—a formless something which neither resembled man nor beast.

CHAPTER XXII

THE BORDER PATROL

DEBORAH rose timidly to her feet, her heart beginning to beat once more, but not with fear. Forth from the darkness came the low whinney of a horse in sudden recognition, while as instantly that horrid shadow took both shape and form. It was a horse, saddled, bridled, the rein trailing along the sand, one of the two animals stampeded by the shot which had killed Kelleen. He had sensed her coming in the desert night, and was even then dumbly welcoming her. The girl went forward slowly, doubtfully, fearful of again startling the animal into flight, but he remained quiet, sniffing at her as she drew near, and she finally put hand on the dangling rein. It was the horse Kelleen had ridden, and Deborah hid her face in his mane, and cried softly, while he turned and rubbed his nozzle against her shoulder in silent greeting. It seemed too good to be true; as though God had led her every step of the way. The sudden reaction left her weak as a child.

Yet she must go on; there was more cause now than ever before to go on—more hope of success. She made

the effort twice before she succeeded in dragging herself up into the saddle, but the horse stood patiently, making no attempt to break away. Once there the girl's strength came back, and with it, her determination. All was still, deathly still; not a breath of air touched her cheek; the dense night shut them in. Carefully she located the only star she knew; to her mind it seemed utterly wrong in its position, yet she was faithful to it. Half afraid, yet not daring to venture otherwise, she drew the horse about, and rode south.

The night seemed endless, the black desert eternal. There were times when the girl lost consciousness of everything, except that shining North Star ever at her back. It was her one guide and hope; through it she retained sanity and faith. In that way lay Box Canyon, and those waiting troopers. She dare not ride fast, knowing not what pitfalls were ahead, the course irregular, up and down. The horse picked his way intelligently, the reins lying loose, except as she occasionally held him inexorably to the southward. She swayed wearily in the saddle, clinging to the high pommel for support, unable to see, yet aware that they crossed shallow ravines, and found passage occasionally along ridges of outcropping rock, and then advanced more easily for long spaces over wide expanses of sand, noiselessly as a specter. It was hard to keep

awake, to concentrate, to remember—she had to struggle to realize this was not all a dream.

Then, after seemingly endless hours, the dawn came. Would she ever again forget it? She hardly knew at first what it was. Riding drearily with lowered head, she became dimly aware of a change, a lightening of the gloom about, a dull grayness tinging faintly the black wall of the surrounding night. Almost as she wondered the daylight came, wan and spectral at first, widening her vista on a gray circle as the stars slowly faded from out a multicolored sky. To the left a brightening white light shot up in long streamers, touching with more gaudy tinges the edges of fleecy clouds, while in the other direction a purple haze blended with the deeper shadows along the horizon. It was the coming of the sun, rising majestically above the far-off rim of the desert, and she was still moving southward; through the long night hours she had kept the faith.

Yet there was little of hope, of encouragement, in the picture unrolled before her. Her view gradually spread out in wider and wider circle, but with no relief to its drear sameness, or monotony. Sand, leagues upon leagues of sand, stretched wherever her wearied eyes turned, leveled by the wind, or cast upward in rounded hillocks, but ever gray, depressing, a sea of desolation, dead, unmovable, extending to the far circle of the

overshadowing arch of sky. It was all lifeless, not even a sagebush, or Spanish bayonet visible. No animal moved amid that dreariness, no wing of bird cleaved the air overhead. The great plain was the very personification of death, and the girl's heart sank in despair as the intense loneliness gripped her soul. Where was the end? Was there an end? She began to realize hunger and thirst; to dread the fierce heat of that sun once it reached mid-sky, its rays scorching the hot sands.

Doubts assailed her. Had she taken the right course? Did Kelleen imply that Box Canyon lay directly south, and had she been led astray, and thus wandered blindly out into the very heart of the desert? Could she, could the horse live through such a day of torture as that rising sun promised? The animal plodded on grimly, with drooping head, unguided now by any pressure on the rein. He must know better than she the route—some instinct surely must lead him to water, if any there was in all that wide waste of sand and sky. Helpless, hopeless, the girl drooped down wearily in the saddle, closing her eyes to the desolation. They plodded on drearily, her mind a chaos, haunted by every memory of horror arising from those swift-occurring events which had led to this tragedy. Her forcible marriage to Bob Meager, the bitter hatred his touch

had aroused, his drunken, lustful eyes, the blow she struck him, with murder in her heart, the fleeing like a hunted criminal, desperately seeking escape. Then the coming of Kelleen into her life, strangely, mysteriously weaving about her a web of fascination, even as they rode together through the darkness. She had never entirely thrown that off, the odd spell of his presence, his cool, confident words—she felt she never would. Even when she questioned him the most, she still secretly believed; and now that he was actually dead, not so much as the flicker of a doubt remained.

She saw again that dead man in the cave; experienced the grip of those savage arms, and once more, in heedless terror, fired down the black tunnel, and then struggled upward through that awful hole into the light of day. Then all that followed, followed so swiftly, was but a jumble of events, yet each distinct, unforgettable, burned on her soul. The talk of those two men in the growing dusk, the certainty of criminal conspiracy in which they were both concerned; the desperate effort at escape; the willingness to die on the desert rather than fall again into their hands; the capture by Kelleen; his words of faith, confidence, almost of love, restoring her belief in him—and then that shot out of the darkness sending him whirling headlong to his death. True! it could not be true! It must be

delirium, a wild fiction of romance raging in the brain of a half-mad dreamer. Yet this was the desert—the desert! She lifted her eyes to look, gazing out blindly over the dull gray expanse. Then she suddenly sat upright in the saddle, shadowing her leveled brows with one hand as she stared straight ahead. What was it over yonder? a tree? a ridge of uplifted rock? Not much, surely, and yet everything in midst of that solitude. Her heart beat suddenly with hope. Perhaps that marked the end; perhaps that was where the trail ran—the trail to Box Canyon. If so, God was good!

The tired horse lifted his head, and whinnied, breaking into a slow trot, the sand crunching under his hoofs. Deborah was wide awake now, alert and ready. Yet it actually was a tree, and the tops of others began to show beyond; their presence promised water, grass, life; that horrid desert left behind. Yet it was a long, dreary ride of an hour before they reached there, coming to a shallow valley through which trickled a mere rill, rock strewn, and almost as desolate as had been the desert itself, but with here and there a patch of grass visible, and a few scattered, wind-racked trees. It was a scene scarcely less dreary than the upper plain, yet to Deborah, and her horse, was most welcome.

The latter came down the slanting bank gingerly, and made for the nearest water hole, the girl slipping

quickly from the saddle, and seeking to quench her thirst farther up stream. The water, slightly brackish, but still fairly clear and pure, brought new life, the animal wandering about in his fresh environment, nibbling contentedly at the scattered tufts of grass, while Deborah studied her surroundings with awakened interest. Old Tom Meager, in their rides together, had taught her some of the fundamentals of plainscraft, how to observe this thing, and that, when alone in the wilds. Now she applied these lessons eagerly, searching for some evidence of that trail which she felt convinced must run up this lonely valley. Nothing could be better adapted to the purpose of these outlaws than the course of this desolate desert stream, a mere thread extending through leagues of sand, lying sufficiently below the level to conceal their movements, and yet furnishing water for their stock. In spite of its windings, the trend of the valley was clearly from south to north, and doubtless for years, perhaps for centuries, way back in the old Spanish days, it might have been the natural highway for desperate riders across the border—rustlers, cattle thieves, smugglers, and runners of contraband. Surely they must have left some trail behind.

But if so no trace remained along the western shore. Convinced of this Deborah, leading her horse, crossed the narrow stream, stepping from rock to rock, and

clambering up the level plateau on the other side. Even here little was visible, and she would have overlooked even these signs but for old Tom's training. Whatever had been the story of the long past, this isolated trail up the valley could not have been used extensively of late—surely no cattle had been driven over it for a year, at least, a tough, wiry grass covering every open spot. Yet evidence was found—the scattered, dead ashes of a fire; the mark of a shod horse's hoof, an open sheaf knife, the blade not yet rusted from exposure, and a half-dozen emptied cartridge shells. Later, up stream a few rods, she found where a dozen horses had been tied to a picket rope, stamping their hoofs into the soft sod. But beyond this point the soil ceased, and, whatever trail there was vanished on a surface of hard rock which left no trace. Nevertheless she mounted once more, and rode on, still with her course to the south.

Two hours later the valley had contracted into a mere chasm running between rock walls, these constantly increasing in height on either side of the little stream. Yet the trail followed became plainer defined, as along here passing caravans had been compelled to proceed in single file, wearing a well-marked depression in the stone. Thousands of hoofs must have done that, and the girl's imagination could but picture

the scenes — the dark shadows of the gorge, the gloomy border desolation, the slow-moving cattle goaded forward by men on horseback, Mexican raiders, or rustlers from the north, outlaws of all degrees; or perhaps a train of burros, laden with contraband, or ore, armed, desperate men guarding them through the black night passage. Then the mirage faded from her mind in sheer weariness of brain and body.

How terribly exhausted she was, reeling in the saddle from faintness. She ached from head to foot, and she felt strangely dizzy. Twice she dismounted to bathe her face in the running water, but had found it so difficult to climb up into the saddle again, she dare not venture a third time. She could only cling tight to the pommel, with eyes closed, and let the horse pick his own way along the outlaw trail. Box Canyon! Could this be Box Canyon? She opened her eyes to look up, the great cliffs towering so high above she could scarcely gain glimpse of a ribbon of blue sky. It was like twilight where she rode, the walls purplish blue, nothing clearly visible a dozen yards ahead. She shuddered at the dreary loneliness, the awful silence. If this was Box Canyon, then she had come too late — there were no soldiers there.

She closed her eyes again, struggling for control, for courage, clutching at the pommel to hold herself up-

right. Then the horse stopped as though gripped by a hand, and a voice said shortly.

"Gee! but it's a woman. Say, wake up, sister, and tell us what yer' doin' here."

She stared at him dumbly, a boy in khaki, his hand grasping her bridle rein, a short rifle in the hollow of his other arm, his face featuring astonishment.

"Asleep, was yer'? Hell of a place ter sleep."

"Are you a soldier?" she asked, struggling with her dizziness, "a cavalryman?"

"Sure—U. S. You're Yank too, ain't yer? That's what bothers me; now if yer was Mex, I'd know what to do."

"What?"

"Hustle yer on to the Lieut; he an' the rest of 'em are back there."

"Yes, yes, I know," she exclaimed excitedly. "You are here to intercept gun-runners across the line. I—I have been hunting for you all night. He—he is dead—killed."

"Dead! Who's dead?"

"Captain Kelleen."

She reeled in the saddle, everything black before her. The trooper sprang and caught her as she fell.

CHAPTER XXIII

"ALVARA'S LOST MINE"

KELLEEN lay breathless on his back, staring up uncomprehendingly through the tangled branches of a tree. He was bruised and dazed, scarcely certain whether he was dead or alive, yet dimly aware of what had actually occurred. It all came back clearer, more definite, as the mist left his brain, but he felt no desire to move, to make any physical effort. Every muscle of his body ached, and he felt sick, inert, helpless. The red reflection of the fire yet clung to the face of the overhanging cliff; he could trace it clearly enough through those tree branches, and he shuddered at the distance from where he lay and the rim. He had fallen from there, no doubt of that; his brain grasped the fact, yet without fully comprehending all that had occurred. He remembered the spit of flame out of the darkness, the report, the bullet striking him, and the horror of that awful fall, as he grasped madly at the air. And what then? Did he lose consciousness? Did the shock numb his brain? He must have crashed headlong through those tree limbs, his progress stopped and diverted, until, by some fate, his bruised and battered

body had been flung here, like a bit of driftwood on the beach.

He extended his arms, and felt about to be sure—yes, he lay there on a shelf of earth, out of which that tree grew; the gnarled trunk was within reach of his hand, and another tree, a smaller one, was at the left. It was so dark there he could see little, yet that fire was still below, and, if he should roll off, he would have another sheer drop, God knew how far. He dare make no effort to turn over. How badly was he hurt? He felt cold perspiration bead his face, but when he tested his limbs they responded, not without pain to be sure, yet there were evidently no bones broken. The knowledge heartened him instantly. But he had been shot. He recalled that clearly—the sickening sensation as the ball struck, the very force of impact hurling him over. It was his left side; it must have been his left side, yet he was conscious of no special pain there—perhaps the flesh was numbed by the shock. He dreaded to learn the truth, yet forced himself partially to sit up, and examine. There was a hole in the coat, but none in the shirt beneath; the flesh was untorn, but painful to the touch, and decidedly swollen. The bullet had struck him, but failed to penetrate; had been deflected by something—his watch! Surely; he carried it there in his upper coat pocket. His fingers drew the wreck

forth, and the bullet dropped into his lap; he picked it up—caliber .44—with a queer feeling of horror, and then placed it in a pocket. The ruins of the watch smashed beyond repair he flung away. For the moment he was dazed, what it all meant remained vague and confused.

Kelleen began to understand, and his mind to function. He was not killed, not even seriously hurt. He had been almost miraculously saved; but now he must serve himself. He harbored no doubt as to who had shot him, or why. The very manner in which it had been done, out of the concealment of the night, revealed the method of Bob Meager. It was his fashion, his style; the way of a coward who never met his enemies face to face. Yet why should the fellow have held him as an enemy? The only answer Kelleen could find to this query was Deborah. The fellow must have seen and recognized the girl as she flashed past him on the stolen horse; he must have followed bent on revenge, discovered them together, and in sudden anger fired the shot. There was no other satisfactory explanation. Bob had not previously known the woman had left the ranch; he believed her still there, hidden in his stepmother's room, his helpless victim on his return. Otherwise the man had nothing against Kelleen, had no suspicions of him, except possibly a desire that he

keep out of this particular affair. That surely was not sufficient to justify an attempt at cold-blooded murder. No, it must be the girl.

And what had become of her? Kelleen had no recollection of a second shot, so it was altogether probable she had been spared, and was again a prisoner in the hands of her brutal husband. If so, no greater service could be rendered the girl than an exposure of Bob Meager's rascality. With the fellow once safely in the hands of the law she would obtain release, and the opportunity of escape if she so desired. And he felt no doubt as to her desire. The man had taken her by force; her earlier dislike had been changed into hatred — and — and — since then another impelling force might have come into her life. Kelleen smiled, sitting up in the darkness, his mind dwelling over the memory of those hours they had passed together. He realized suddenly how much he already cared for her, how deeply her womanliness had impressed him; what it would mean if she should turn back to Bob Meager.

The very thought of such a possibility nerved him to action, to forgetfulness of his bruises. He had seen that in the depths of her eyes he would never forget; he would live to read that message again. The memory was inspiration, and hope. But where could he turn? Where could he go? He was one man pitted against

twenty at least, his only advantage being Meager's belief that he was dead, and safely out of the way. He must remain unseen, undiscovered, until he learned the truth. His mind grasped the situation swiftly, as he planned his own course of action. There was no reason why Casebeer's outfit should remain in the valley; they had already unloaded, and stored away out of sight whatever they had to transport. Their whole interest must be to get safely away on the back trail before daylight. Already the fire had died down into mere embers, and, he believed, a part at least of the pack train had departed. After they all had gone only Meager, and his small party, would be left behind. How many there might be of these Kelleen had no means of knowing, yet it was scarcely probable many were in the secret of what was going on—Meager himself, Sanchez, and one or two others perhaps; not enough to prove particularly dangerous, if they did not even suspect his being alive. Tomorrow surely that squad of cavalrymen must appear from Box Canyon; they would scout up this way if nothing occurred to detain them. Those were their orders, and, if they followed the trail, they could scarcely fail to reach this hole in the desert. All he needed to do in the meanwhile was to discover exactly what this gang was up to, and then wait.

To his mind the key of the whole mystery must lie

in that cave tunnel described by Deborah. If he could once probe into its secret the whole strange case would be solved. Meager had endeavored vainly to communicate with whoever was on guard below, and failed. Perhaps the fellow was lying there in the darkness dead, struck by that wild bullet the girl had fired. Bob had no time to investigate then, to learn the truth — he had been led out into the desert in his chase after the flying horse. Even now he might be delayed by his prisoner; by his final settlement with Casebeer; by the urgent necessity of seeing that everything was carefully stored, and out of sight, in that hut yonder. If any investigation was to be made, it must be attempted now — he would take the chance.

To decide with Kelleen was to act. The peril of the adventure scarcely occurred to him; his life had long before inured him to danger. All he sought was opportunity. Slowly, cautiously, keeping well back in the shadow, he lowered his body down the face of the cliff, taking advantage of every irregularity, outcropping rocks giving him foot and handhold, until he finally reached the firm turf below. As he glanced back over his course, marking the high outline of the crest against the lighter sky above, the memory of that awful plunge over the edge, left him for an instant sick and nerveless. Then he drove the recollection from him with a bitter

laugh. What odds! he was alive; he would pay the debt. He could not stand there like a frightened child in the dark. He moved on in the depth of the cliff shadow with eyes searching the gloom, and ears listening for any sound.

In that darkness he scarcely realized where he was, yet, when he came to it, experienced no difficulty in recognizing the mound on which he and Deborah had taken breakfast together. He climbed the sloping side cautiously on hands and knees, his revolver drawn, and clenched in nerveless fingers. The man was cool now, and ready, advancing steadily through the maze of rocks strewing the surface, until he felt out the slight evidences of a trail. Here was where Deborah must have attempted her retreat, as it skirted the face of the cliff, which bulged out above him. The front was draped with clinging vines, while below he found a tangle of bushes, almost impenetrable. Kelleen crept along these, vainly seeking some opening, and, finally, in despair, pressed them aside, crawling noiselessly into the dark covert, seeking that opening in the rock which must be hidden somewhere beyond. Its discovery eluded him, and it was not until he ventured to stand erect, feeling above the lower barrier of rock, that he really convinced himself of its existence. He stood hesitatingly, his heart thumping from excitement. There was no sound

of movement within—only profound silence, and impenetrable darkness. Yet surely this could be no storage house, no mere receptacle for stolen goods as he previously had imagined. There was no beaten trail leading to it; no dead, trampled vines, no pathway opening through the shrubs. The secret of the place remained hidden, its shield undisturbed. Whoever came here must have weaved their way as carefully as he had, concealing all evidence of passage, leaving no trail behind.

What then did that darkness conceal? What did it really mean? Crime, beyond a doubt—yet of what nature, what degree? He could only learn within. With teeth clenched, and automatic ready, Kelleen drew himself up to the top of the barrier rock, lay there flat for a moment, peering into the blackness, and then slowly lowered his feet to the surface below, groping blindly about with extended hand, which touched nothing. It was a ghastly place in which he stood with back to the wall staring into the intense darkness. He had no conception of what lurked behind that black, impenetrable curtain—what peril, what surprise. Somewhere within there lay a dead man, perhaps two; and, quite possibly, others not dead, but desperate and murderous, waited him along the grim passage. Perhaps they already knew of his entrance,

and crouched there in readiness to strike. He must accept the chance and go on.

In spite of the shrinking of his flesh, Kelleen began to advance, feeling with his feet, and keeping one hand against the rough side wall. It was a tunnel beyond all doubt, leading at first straight into the cliff, the sides chipped and irregular, leaving to the touch of his fingers, the ridge marks of a pick. Men had toiled here, not nature, and had plainly left their handiwork. When? how long ago? what had become of them? "Alvara's Lost Mine!" The words seemed to burn themselves on his mind, and before him arose a vision of the old Spaniard working there alone in the long years ago. Could it be possible? After all this time had he actually rediscovered that ancient storehouse of fabulous wealth, that golden treasury of which all northern Mexico had dreamed? And what of Alvara? He had disappeared men said; died in the heart of the desert; went forth never to return. Had he met that mysterious death here in this black hole, surrounded by his golden treasure? Did he lie there in loneliness through the long years since? and was he there still on guard over his treasure?

Kelleen stopped, holding his breath, conscious of the perspiration beading his face. Was the place accursed? Did Death lurk there mockingly, eager for

another victim? He cast aside the thought with a gesture of bitter scorn. All image of the supernatural left him, and in its place came men. What was Meager, and his outfit doing here? That was what he must face and learn—not how Alvara died. He went on, cautiously, blindly, the darkness closing behind. God! how still it was! Was that a stealthy movement off there to the left? The man wheeled about, revolver swung up, and stood poised and breathless. Straight into his eyes leaped a blinding burst of flame.

CHAPTER XXIV

A DUEL IN THE DARK

KELLEEN staggered backward, yet instinctively fired at the black, almost shapeless, shadow, revealed an instant in the flame. The speeding bullet had missed him by a hair's breadth, yet in the second of startled surprise he retained no power of action. He had seen the man crouched against the farther wall, a mere black blot, almost unrecognizable. Then that awful darkness again, and silence. With his first return of strength he stepped swiftly to one side, stooping low, and listening for the slightest movement. His heart almost ceased to beat.

Somewhere within that impenetrable curtain the fellow waited, listening eagerly, probably uncertain still as to the effect of his shot. Kelleen was not sure of his position, yet somewhere, almost within arm's length, murderous and determined, a ready weapon in his hands, the man was endeavoring to locate him, with a desire to kill. It was to be a duel to the death in the dark. Both would never leave that tunnel alive; there was no way of getting out, no opportunity for escape. Any attempt would only reveal the position, and invite

a swift shot. But was the man alone? What other antagonists lurked in the blackness? If there was but one, then they stood on equal ground—both armed, both blinded. He must accept the chance. Slowly, cautiously, not making the slightest sound, he moved stealthily in toward that left-hand wall near which he had perceived the dim figure. He touched the rock with outstretched hand, and stopped in dread uncertainty. Out of the void came nothing to guide him.

He waited a minute, two minutes—it seemed an age—leaning forward, every nerve tense, his very breath suspended, nervous finger on the trigger. God! the fellow could not long remain motionless where he was; he would never dare. Unless that chance shot had gone home? The mere suggestion leaping into the brain brought to the hunted man a flash of courage. It might be, dim as his mark had been, hurriedly as he had fired, the chance shot might have told, leaving the fellow dead on the rock floor. He had heard no sound, no groan, no muffled fall, yet men sometimes died silently, instantly—there was a hope, a possibility.

He could not stand there cramped, with poised muscles, waiting for nothing, staring helplessly about into that blackness. He must know, act, learn the truth at whatever cost. He could bear that strain no longer. He advanced an inch at a time, feeling forward with

groping foot, still obsessed by the idea that thus he might encounter an outstretched body on the floor. He had gone a foot, two feet, three; then, suddenly his foot dislodged a pebble, which grated sharply in the intense stillness. Instantly the tunnel flamed again; he felt a sting in his shoulder, the impact driving him flat against the side wall—but he saw his man, and was ready. Firing once he leaped forward, grappling for the dim shadow as the darkness closed them in again.

Kelleen's clutching fingers got grasp on an arm, which tore itself free. The butt of a rifle, wielded savagely, crunched into his chest, but the fellow stumbled as he struck the blow, and Kelleen's hand found grip once more in a mass of long hair. From then on it was a wild, blind struggle, silent, merciless, brutal, in which neither man gave, nor asked, quarter, instinctively realizing it was to the death. Kelleen's weapon was crushed out of his hand against the wall, his knuckles dripping blood, and he heard his antagonist's rifle crash to the floor the first minute of struggle. They closed desperately with bare hands, unable to break away, Kelleen's fingers clinched in the long beard, the other driving his fist again and again into his face in mad effort to make him release the grip.

They swayed back and forth, tripping over a pile of débris, crashing against the wall, exerting every ounce

of strength, breathing in gasps, but speechless. Kelleen lowered his head, thrusting it under his opponent's uplifted chin, and with one free hand struck with all the power he possessed. As he did so iron arms crushed him—such arms as he had never felt, like bars of steel—and the lunging body of the man seemed to force him irresistibly backward. Inch by inch he had to give, fighting desperately, hopelessly, to retain his feet; then suddenly crashed over into the darkness, the other falling full upon him, now gripping with one hand at his exposed throat, the other fumbling at his waist. The knife! the knife! It must be the knife the fellow sought. What came next Kelleen never knew. He fought in delirium, in unconsciousness, the very breath crushed out of him, unable to break that strangle hold, or twist his body from underneath. He knew he touched the knife handle; that he reached it first, struggling to retain his grasp beneath the fierce pressure of the other's gripping fingers. In some way he must have turned partly, squirming on one side, so as to jam the fellow's hand between his hip and the hard stone floor. In that instant he had jerked the blade free, and slashed viciously at the huge bulk above him. Again and again he drove in the steel, knowing not where he struck, but feeling a wild exultation as the limbs gripping him relaxed, and hot blood spurted on his hand. There was

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no moan, no outcry, but at last the man rolled over sideways, and lay still.

With the instant all strength left Kelleen. The knife dropped from his fingers, and he rested motionless, scarcely breathing, his eyes staring up into the dark. He had won; he was not seriously hurt, yet for the moment could not even realize his victory. It had come so suddenly, so unexpectedly he could not credit the truth. He had been crushed helplessly, gripped in those merciless arms, smothered by that body, his throat held in a vise. Every hope had left him, and then—this silence, this panting for breath, this slowly returning consciousness. Yet gradually he knew; the knife, he had wielded—the knife—he had killed the man. Whoever he was he had killed him; he lay there now beside him in the dark—dead. The very horror of it started anew the blood in his veins, that dead man lying there, motionless, becoming cold, with open eyes staring up at the tunnel roof. And he had killed him—killed him with the knife. Yet it had been a fair fight, man to man, and one of them had to die. He could breathe better now, and he sat up, trembling and shrinking back from contact with the dead body. He could not see it, but he knew it was there.

Then the doubt, the fear, the questioning horror passed away. He laughed at himself for having been

so unnerved. He had seen dead men before, and this had been a fair fight. His groping hand touched his own revolver, and he thrust it back into the sheaf at his waist mechanically, yet with a sudden sense of relief. Surely there were no others in the place; they would have heard the firing, the sound of struggle. He was safe enough then—for the present; but he must make sure. He hesitated for some time, his nerves shattered and failing to respond to his will. The silence and darkness made it hard to get a grip on himself—he had a sense of being buried alive there with a corpse; of being himself half paralyzed. Yet finally the brain forced the trembling hands to action. He must see the face of the man he had fought and gain one glimpse, at least, of his surroundings.

Kelleen struck a match which gave forth at first a dim, spectral light between his trembling fingers, then glowed into a sudden flame. He thrust it forward over the body of the dead man, and stared down at the upturned face. For a moment not a muscle relaxed, his form that of a statue, as his eyes searched those ghastly features. Where had he seen the man before? that hairy face? those long, misshapen arms? Dead! of course he was dead—but who was he? Somewhere in his memory, dim, indistinct, clung a recollection which would not become wholly clear. The match flickered,

throwing weird shadows, the flame creeping slowly up the splinter of wood until it burned his hand. He cast it from him, and crouched there again in pitch blackness. Then the vision came, his lips uttering a startled exclamation.

"By God! I know now; it's Manuel Gomez! It's the ape-man!"

Manuel Gomez—the murderer, the outlaw, the dread scourge of northern Mexico, that bloodthirsty wretch, whose crimes had made him an object of detestation on both sides of the line for years. Manuel Gomez, the killer of women and children, the destroyer of towns, raider, thief, bandit, and insurrecto—the ape-man! Kelleen had never seen him before, but he knew; there could be no other like that, and every story he previously had heard of the fellow came trooping back to his mind in vivid memory—cruel, remorseless, without mercy, hunted like a wild beast, yet ever escaping the toils, he had left a trail of blood over all that land. Well, he was dead now! Yet how came he to be there? Was this his hiding place? or was the man there for some new crime? If so—what? And Bob Meager? Juan Sanchez? were they also sharers in his villainy? Could they be members of this fiend's gang? Was it from here he led his hellhounds over the desert and plain?

The recurrence of these names instantly brought back to Kelleen a realization of his own peril. Gomez was dead, killed by his hand. Unwittingly, unknowingly, there in the dark, in desperate combat, he had avenged a hundred murders by the thrust of a knife. But these others—they were still alive; they would surely come. There could be no doubt of that. All that Deborah had told flashed across his mind—her encounter with this same Mexican ruffian—why she had even described the fellow's long, apelike arms, but he never once had thought of Gomez—of her creeping onward along the tunnel; the sudden change in its direction, and her stumbling over a dead body in the dark. He recalled the story of her escape, creeping up that narrow passage, through which she could barely squeeze her slender body; the firing after her from below, and her aimless shot sent in return; then the desperate struggle which ended on the desert above. And what then? Meager, Bob Meager, going straight to that same hole and calling down for Manuel—using his very name.

Well, there was no Manuel now on guard there, but he could not face these other two alone, and they would surely be there by dawn at least. Kelleen searched about on hands and knees for the gun Gomez had dropped, but could not locate it in the darkness. He arose to his feet, still dazed and confused, hardly able

to tell directions, but driven by a wild impulse to escape, to get safely out of that silent blackness, that grave, in which he felt smothered and imprisoned. He wanted to breathe the fresh air, to look up at the wide arch of sky. He endeavored to find his way, circling the dead body, and feeling with one hand along the rock wall. His groping fingers discovered a crevice in the stone, as though the solid rock had been rent asunder, a deep, irregular gash yawning the length of his arm. He even advanced a step into the strange fissure, wondering at its existence, tempted to explore its secret, when they came! He heard them pressing aside the vines, and clambering to the top of the rock which helped conceal the entrance. They did this apparently without fear, with no impending sense of danger, and then dropped to the floor of the tunnel. There were two of them; he could tell that by the sound—Meager and Sanchez. But where then was Deborah Meredith?

CHAPTER XXV

THE LIGHT GOES OUT

KELLEEN waited in an agony of suspense, his thought with the missing girl, rather than on his own peril, or the nearness of those men groping blindly toward him in the darkness. That they were surprised, startled at not being greeted by Gomez, was plainly evidenced from the first gruff utterance reaching his ears.

"Where the hell is the fellow?" Meager exclaimed angrily. "I told you I called him from up above, and got no answer. Now, by God! he isn't even down here."

"Oh, he's here all right. There was no chance for his getting away without our knowing it. We had our men about here all the time."

"Your men!" Meager laughed scornfully. "Those greasers; they would only be playthings for Manuel. Hell, man! you and your gang couldn't even keep your eyes on 'Frisco.'"

"I supposed you sent him," retorted Sanchez, with a Spanish oath. "I thought he was in with us. Why shouldn't I? He blew into the ranch along with the

judge, an' you seemed damned glad to see him. You two been together before, so sure I took it he was in on this trick. Then the fellow rode into me the next morning——”

“And threw sand in your eyes.”

“He sure told me one damn straight story. He seemed to know about all was going on. I'd heard a lot about him, knew he was a friend of yours, and supposed him all right.”

“And spilled all you knew—damn a Mex, anyhow.”

“Well, ain't he?”

“Ain't he what? He ain't nothing just now. I did run with him a bit, of course, down below the line. But he wasn't invited into this game, and his being with Garrity was just an accident. At least I took it that way at first. Now I sorter reckon it maybe was all a put-up job. I ain't exactly made up my mind what the guy was up to—just suspected something was going on, and decided to butt in, I reckon. But, after he got out here snooping around, there wasn't nothing to do but put him out o' the way—specially after he stole my horse.”

“I ain't so sure he stole the horse.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just what I told you before. You're so bull-headed nobody can tell you nothing. I never did think

that fellow you shot was alone. He was talking to somebody when we crept up—I heard him."

"Talking to himself; you never saw nobody but him."

"No, I didn't; he was upon that rock against the sky, but there might have been somebody else out o' sight on the ground. You was in such a damn hurry to get to Casebeer, you wouldn't do anything else."

"Course, I knew the 'Kid' was alone, and after that tumble he took wouldn't bother no more. We had to get Casebeer's gang out of here before daylight."

"I don't know why. You haven't told me much. Why didn't you let the outfit go on? What did you want to unload the mules here for? and then send them back?"

"I didn't get any chance to tell you. It was after you left last night that I got the dope. That's why I had to ride out here myself, by God, on my wedding night." He laughed out loud. "Say, Sanchez, there's some real girl, let me tell you. Thinks she's knocked me out; rapped me with a gun when I was drunk, and got away. Damned if she didn't, the little vixen. I've got to go back and show her what kind of a he-man I am when I'm sober."

"She got mad at you?"

"Rather that. I thought she was the soft sort, but she's a wildcat. Got me the first swipe, but she'll never

find me so dead easy the next time. I'll teach her who's boss when I get this job out of the way. What was it you asked?"

"Why you stopped Casebeer?"

"That's what Garrity came to tell me. He'd got on to something. There's a leak somewhere. We couldn't get the stuff through tonight—a bunch of cavalry are up in Box Canyon."

"Hell! What brought 'em there?"

"The judge didn't know. He got it from somebody at the post. The outfit started south, but that's where they were bound."

"You don't suppose they know?"

"Sure not—only suspect that stuff is being run through again along this trail. All we got to do is lie low awhile."

"No one has seen Gomez?"

"He hasn't put his head out of this hole. You haven't seen him yourself, Juan. Come on, he must be back in there asleep somewhere now likely. Keep one hand on the wall."

"Shall I strike a match, señor?"

"No, not here; wait till we turn the bend; then it will not show outside. Can't be long now till daylight comes."

Kelleen silently pressed into the rift of the rock, the

dead man at his feet, could mark the passage of the two clearly by the scraping of feet as they groped their way along the stone floor. Following the opposite wall they would miss any contact with Gomez' body, and there was nothing he could do but stand, and let them pass. Twice he lifted his weapon tempted to venture a shot through the darkness, but the risk was too great; moreover he had a wild desire to learn more, a suspicion that he was on the verge of discovery—if something would only cause them to talk.

Already from the few words overheard he had arrived at one conclusion—the running of munitions into Mexico was a mere subterfuge, a side issue of no great importance compared with some other scheme they had in view. Kelleen could only guess at this, yet it certainly must center about Manuel Gomez. If this was the hide-out of that outlaw, the tunnel must contain treasure, the spoils of numerous robberies. The fellow was leader of a gang which had sacked cities, devastated churches, held citizens for ransom, terrorized whole provinces; there was no limit to the wealth he might have hidden away. If Meager and Sanchez were members of his gang, or if they had discovered this secret by accident, they might be playing now for big stakes. And Garrity! surely Garrity would have a hand in any deviltry which might be conceived. He

was in position to warn them of any danger, to decide the proper moment in which to act. Dangerous as his position was, Kelleen, with these suspicions surging through his mind, could not resist the impulse to linger a few moments longer. His whole life had been adventure, and he took the chance on one more. Without it he hardly felt that he lived.

The two men had turned the sharp corner, the slight sound of their movements ceasing to reach his ears. Then the faint glow of a match reflected along the rock wall, the silence broken by Meager's voice.

"There's the lantern, Juan—in that niche, see. Here, turn up the wick."

The flame brightened suddenly, but the outer tunnel yet remained black. Only in the distance the light flickered along the walls, casting weird shadows. One of the men evidently held the lantern up, peering about curiously.

"He's not here, señor; where's the old devil, anyhow?"

"Damned if I know," anger in the gruff tone. "Something is wrong here. By God! Suppose he has skipped out?"

"How could he? We watched always. He trusted you, señor?"

"Hell, of course not!"

"You know where the stuff is? He never went away without that."

"Sure not, Juan; but I don't know. The old devil was too smart to let that secret out. That was our job now—to make him tell. The judge says it's here, a hell of a lot of it, but nobody knows where. Once I get hands on him, he'll tell, or he'll die by inches—what's that out yonder?"

They moved forward with the light, and Kelleen, all fear swiftly lost in his intense interest, crept on to the curve in the tunnel, from which point he could see their dim shadows. Behind him, but unnoticed, daylight began to be visible through the mantle of vines concealing the entrance. The dark figure on the floor assumed vague outline. The two men in the lantern glow came to a halt, thrusting the light forward, peering at the object which had attracted them. The Mexican identified it first in a sudden cry.

"It's a body, a dead man," he exclaimed. "He has been killed—Manuel!"

Meager held back, the coward gripping him, but Sanchez bore the lantern forward, desperate to learn the truth. His startled voice came down the passage.

"'Tis not Gomez," he cried, "and no face I ever saw before. Perhaps you know the man?"

Meager joined him, glancing uneasily about, and

then staring down into the dead face. He seemed to have lost control of himself, and his lips refused utterance.

"You know him, *señor*?" Sanchez asked impatiently.

"No; but there has been a fight, or a murder—see, he has been shot; and in the back, by God! Gomez must have done this job. But what has become of the old devil? And who was this kid? What was he doing here? See if there is anything in his pockets, Juan. Give me the lantern."

He held it up, as the Mexican dropped to his knees, and began to rummage through the dead man's clothes. The increasing daylight of the desert found entrance far above, and stole down the narrow passage in a faint, ghastly glimmer, which only added to the ghastliness of the scene. The strain was too much for Meager's nerves, and he swore gruffly.

"What the hell makes you so slow? Anything there?"

"No, *señor*; some cartridges, a knife; no gun, it's gone; no papers, only this scrap; see in his fingers, just like someone had torn the rest away—two, three words, that's all; they mean nothing so."

He straightened up slowly; then swiftly bent over, jerking the lantern from out Meager's hand and holding it close above the sand-strewn floor.

"*Saprista!* look at that!" excitedly. "Look, señor!"
"What is it?"

"*Caramba!* You don't see?—the footstep; the woman's shoe! How came it there? And here another; she went up the passage."

"She, you say?"

"Sure it was she; this man leave no such print; see, such a small shoe; it was a girl, a woman, and mark she crept up there. *Madre de Dios!* I bet she stole your horse; I bet she crept out there and waited till you came. But what the hell did she do down here, señor?"

Meager stood as though dazed, unable to collect his thoughts, staring first at those telltale footprints in the sand dust, and then about into the gloom of the tunnel. It was all mystery, only to be solved by the discovery of Manuel Gomez.

"Come on," he said fiercely; "bring the light. We'll search every inch of this damned hole."

Kelleen turned, his first impulse being to escape, to rush toward that dim glimmer of light now plainly marking the cave entrance. Yet the futility of such an effort came to him instantly. They would hear him before he could take three steps; as he clambered up the rock, his body plainly outlined against the dawn, he would make a perfect target. There was a better

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way than that, and he whirled back to face them, as the two came cautiously forward, the glow of the lantern glimmering like a red star. The hand with the weapon in it fell to a level, and he fired, the glass flickering into a thousand pieces, the light instantly extinguished.

CHAPTER XXVI

IN ON A NEW GAME

KELLEEN'S plan of action had formed swiftly in his mind. He had a glimmering of what this conspiracy meant, but must learn more. Only one method was possible—a confession from Bob Meager. The real secret of this tunnel was in his possession, now that Manuel Gomez was dead. Sanchez was only a pawn in the game, trusted in a measure, but possessing only a dim suspicion of the real value of the stakes being played for. Meager, coward, villain as he was, had the cunning to conceive; the Mexican the desperate courage to execute. Sanchez dead would do no harm, but, at present, Meager alive would prove a value. He must be made to talk.

It was a cool, deliberate proposition which flashed before him. He would fight it out right there, where he was. There were only two of them fronting him—Meager he held in utmost contempt; the other was dangerous, yet no more than an ordinary Mexican outlaw to be shot down without remorse.

The advantages in this encounter were altogether on his side. He knew them, where they were; they

possessed no knowledge of his exact position, who he was, or whether they faced one opponent or a dozen. They had been taken completely by surprise, startled by the sudden attack, confused in the darkness. Peering forth from the shelter of the sharp rock edge behind which he crouched, Kelleen was unable to distinguish the figures of the two men—yet, behind where they must be hidden in the gloom, the gray daylight filtered down through that narrow opening leading up to the desert above, and faintly tinged the rock walls. If they moved, if they attempted to retreat, concealment was impossible. He had both of them absolutely at his mercy.

The silence was intense after that first startled second. There was no movement, not even the sound of breathing audible. The two stood motionless, crouched back against the wall, peering into the blackness from whence that tongue of flame had leaped into their very faces, yet revealing nothing. They could neither think, nor act. Who had fired—Manuel Gomez? some enemy who had trapped them? Were they facing one man, or a dozen? Into what had they blindly walked? Confident of his own safety, realizing that he had the whip hand, Kelleen smiled grimly, every nerve tense, his revolver poised. The situation pleased him.

"Drop your guns, both of you!" he commanded

sternly. "Quick now! I've got you against the light."

"Who the hell——"

"Stop that! Drop them, or I shoot something besides a lantern. It's a hair trigger I'm playing with."

He heard both weapons fall to the floor, Meager cursing impotently, but the Mexican silent. Kelleen laughed.

"Kick them away from you—that's right! Not bad fellows when properly handled, I see. Now up with your hands, and back against the wall there."

He could not see the fellows, not so much as an outline of them, yet knew they obeyed the order. It was a bluff which worked because they half believed themselves silhouetted against that distant gray bar of light far down the passage, targets not to be easily missed. That cool, stern voice, unfamiliar in the echoing tunnel, meant business, rasped like a steel file on Meager's nerves.

"By God! Who are you?" he snarled savagely.
"What the hell do you want?"

"The first is of no importance, Meager," returned Kelleen with emphasis. "But I'll answer the latter question. Unbuckle your belt. Go on; I know what you're doing. Yes; take it off. I've got you boys covered; make one false move, and you'll sure taste lead. Now throw that belt about the Mexican—sure

I know who you both are; I came here gunning for you two guys—around his arms—now, damn you, draw it tight! Yes—that's exaxctly what I mean—strap them to his body——”

Just what happened is not clear. Kelleen could not see; he dare not take a step closer to make sure. The chances are that Sanchez had two guns at his waist. He had discarded one, but the other yet remained. Not certain that he was not outlined against the back-ground of light, he dare not attempt to draw; but now, his hands lowered, as Meager drew the belt about his arms, desperate, bitter with hate, his fingers must have gripped the butt. With one convulsive effort he fired in the direction of the voice. The bullet struck the side wall, sent a splinter of rock tearing into Kelleen's cheek, yet, even as he staggered back half blinded in the flame, he had glimpse of the maddened Mexican, running blindly down the passage. An instant the fellow stood out clear, his head thrust forward, his arms still held by the belt clasp; then Kelleen pulled trigger, and the runner sprawled out, flat and motionless, into the very center of that little pool of gray daylight.

It was the swift work of an instant, then darkness, and Meager's huge bulk crushed Kelleen against the wall in one mad effort to kill. For a moment the smaller man, taken completely by surprise, struggled helplessly

to escape the stranglehold of those clutching fingers. The revolver dropped from his hand, and he was forced resistlessly backward, strangled, unable to tear loose that vicelike grip. As the two fell, however, Meager's head struck the rock, the sharp blow so dazing him as to permit Kelleen an instant of relief, a long, fresh breath, the release of one arm. Underneath him, pressing against his hip, lay the gun he had been forced to drop. With desperate effort he gained possession of the weapon, thrusting the muzzle savagely into Meager's side.

"Damn you!" he choked. "Feel that! Get up, or I'll blow a hole clear through you. You dirty brute, to kill you would be a pleasure. Get clear up! Do you know me now?"

The fellow, thoroughly cowed, shrinking back with the point of the revolver still pressing hard against his rib, stuttered, but made no reply. The widening radius of daylight gave Kelleen the outlines of his bulky figure, but features were invisible.

"What! not yet? I'm the 'Frisco Kid!' First you thought you'd double-cross me; then you decided murder would do the job best. Well, Meager, neither plan worked. I'm on to your game, and I'm very much alive. Now I've got you. Like to make a guess why I don't kill you?"

"You—you want me to squeal first."

"Oh, you'll squeal all right; I've got the thumbscrews to make you talk. You've partly guessed the reason. You know the secret of this hole, and I reckon you are the only one who does. That Mexican partner of yours has got his. Gomez is lying out there with a knife thrust in him—you bet, I know who the devil is—you are the only one of the gang left alive, Bob, and I've got a gun at your heart. Now answer my questions, and answer them damn quick. Have you got your voice back, you big, skunking coward?"

Meager growled something to which the other paid no heed.

"So this was the ape-man's hang-out, was it?"

"Yes."

"How did you catch on?"

"I—I knew him down in Mexico."

"Yes, sure you did; you were with his gang of cut-throats once. I've heard about that—but he never told you of this place?"

Meager hesitated, and Kelleen's gun pushed harder.

"You better spit it out, Bob; I'd sure love to shoot."

"Well, damn you, what's the difference? Garrity told me the fellow was hiding in here somewhere. Manuel used to come to him when he needed stuff, but he never was able to track him—he was too damn smart

for the judge. That was what I came up here for, and mostly the reason why I grabbed the ranch—see. Garrity fixed things, because he knew Manuel had a hell of a lot o' spoils stored away. We wanted a free hand. When I come up I fired every American, and took on Mexicans I knew. We run just cattle enough so as to get an excuse for exploring the desert. We knew the damn slippery cuss was hid around here somewhere, but couldn't get on to his hole."

"Well, go on."

"Seems he wasn't doing anything any more, just hiding out; none of his gang with him. It had got so hot for the old devil he was afraid to show his nose above ground; fifty thousand for him, dead or alive, you know—that last raid had got the U. S. after him as well as Mexico, and he was smart enough to lie out here until it blew over. Maybe we never would have got on to him if Sanchez hadn't struck his trail one day by accident over beyond Silver Springs. That led him into this valley, and then he got lost again. After that we kept a watch. It didn't do no good for some time, the old fox was too sly. So finally Garrity put up a meeting with him—they had some secret signal arranged between 'em—and in that way we traced out this cave and got him cornered."

"Cave! it's a tunnel, ain't it?"

"I don't know what it is. I've only been here once before—in the dark. What's your idea?"

"That Manuel found 'Alvara's Lost Mine'—it's got all the earmarks."

"The—the 'Lost Mine!' Then—then it's worth millions! You—you can't mean it."

"It's only a guess; let's chuck that now, and finish up with Gomez."

"Yes, but wait!" exclaimed Meager eagerly, suddenly seeing a chance for himself. "There ain't no use of you making any gunplay with me, 'Kid.' What's the matter with us being pardners? There's only three of us know about this—you, Garrity, an' me. Hell! there must be money enough here to make us all rich; Gomez has got a devil of a lot hid away somewhere, and, good God! if this is the 'Lost Mine'——"

"Yes, but why pick on me?"

"Well, ain't that what you wanted a while ago? I reckon you ain't no better than we are. Do you want to hog it all? What is the sense of our fighting like two dogs, and trying to kill each other, when, by God! there must be enough here to make us all rich? Nobody else will ever know about it if we keep quiet. All we need do is bury these guys ourselves, get the loot out of the way, and then we got the mine. Hell! it's a cinch!"

Kelleen hesitated, not from any doubt as to his own purpose, but in an endeavor to choose the best method. Meager's plan opened new possibilities; the man must know more than he had revealed, while Garrity was apparently even deeper versed in the mystery. Just now both men would be more valuable alive than dead. He couldn't trust either, not for an instant; they were cold-blooded, treacherous, desperate criminals. There was no honesty in this proposition, only a cunning effort to throw him off his guard. If the chance ever came he would be murdered without a qualm. But now they proposed being partners with him in consummating this crime; he was to associate with them on equal terms, learn their secrets. They believed him to belong to their class, to be an outlaw, hiding from justice, a desperate, reckless character, with a price on his head—the "Frisco Kid." He made decision.

"That sounds fair enough, Bob," he replied quietly.
"You say the judge is in on this, too?"

"Sure; he got the dope, and you can't play any tricks on Garrity. He's coming here this morning."

"Here?"

"That's what. We had a nice little surprise party all made up for Manuel, only you cooked the goose——"

A low, peculiar whistle echoed through the passage,

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and Meager stopped suddenly. Again the whistle sounded, evidently from the entrance to the tunnel.

"I reckon that's him," he said grimly. "Now what is it between us, 'Kid'—peace or war?"

Kelleen thrust his revolver back into his belt.

"I'll play the game," he answered shortly.

CHAPTER XXVII

FACE TO FACE

WITH eyes long accustomed to the darkness the two men could perceive shadowy objects in the outer passage, where little shafts of daylight penetrated through the tangle of concealing foliage. The walls of the tunnel were gray-tinged and darker objects—one perhaps the dead body of Manuel Gomez—shapeless, and grotesque, littered the floor. Meager, evidently feeling full confidence in this new alliance, moved forward, while Kelleen followed, still suspicious, and alert for any treachery. If Garrity came there alone he would take the chance; if not, then he would fight the battle out there in the tunnel, asking no quarter, and giving none. Meager stopped, his huge bulk almost blotting out the light.

"That you, Con?" he asked anxiously.

A head pushed through the vines, but cautiously.

"Who the hell else would it be?" exclaimed an exasperated voice. "What's going on here? Nobody on watch; I didn't want to come poking in, liable to get shot. Where the devil is Manuel?"

"Come inside and I'll explain; just drop over that

ledge; it's only a foot or two to the floor. You came alone?"

The fellow did not answer, but no one followed as he clambered across the barrier of rock. Apparently he could perceive nothing when once within, except the dim, shapeless figures awaiting him.

"Two of you, eh! Damn, but it's dark in here! That you, Manuel?"

"Manuel is dead," explained Meager briefly. "He's been killed."

"Dead! Killed!" The judge pressed his body back against the rock. "What do you mean, Bob? Then who is this other fellow—Sanchez?"

Kelleen took the matter into his own hands.

"I'm the 'Frisco Kid,'" he announced calmly, yet with one hand resting on his gun. "You know me, and that it is all right. I'm in on the deal, that's the only difference."

"In on the deal?"

"Yes; I'll make the story short, and the sooner we get it straight the better. Bob here can correct me if I go wrong. I got onto this cave awhile back—been hiding out in the desert myself, you know—and so finally spotted old Gomez. Of course I didn't realize then that you guys were in the game. All I guessed was that I'd stumbled onto Manuel's hide-out, and that

he probably had a bunch of loot stored away. So I started in to play a lone hand. That was all natural enough, wasn't it?"

"Maybe so," growled Garrity, but still keenly suspicious. "Go on."

"Tonight there was a gang out there running through a pack train of contraband."

"It didn't go through, did it?"

"No; they unloaded, stored it away there at the head of the valley, and went back; but they were working on the job most all night. I got close enough to see who they were, and hear them talk. Jem Casebeer was running the outfit, but Bob here, and the Mexican, Sanchez, seemed to be bossing the affair."

"What in hell has all that got to do with Manuel?"

"Just this. I was looking for a chance to get in here without getting my head blown off. Long about midnight I thought I got a glimpse of old Gomez sneaking along in the shadow of the cliff, like he was trying to find out also what was going on. So, as soon as I could, I struck out to explore. I got in here all right, but must have got the dope wrong, for the cuss was laying for me. We had a fight in the dark, and finally I got him with a knife. That's his body lying over there."

Garrity drew in a deep breath.

"I—I can't see."

"Well, it's there anyhow, next to that side wall. I thought I was all right after that, but before I could go on, Meager and the Mexican came in on me through those vines. I laid low, and let them go by. It was darker than hell in here then, and they naturally talked some while they were feeling their way along the wall. They never saw the body, or me, but I heard enough to put me wise to what they were after."

"What did you hear?"

"How you guys got onto this outfit, and what you proposed to do—you'd double-crossed me all right. So I lay still. A bit later, back in there, after they'd made a light, and, while they were rubbering at another dead one——"

"What?"

"Some fellow who had got his—no one of us knew him—only he had been shot in the back of the head. Well, while they were rubbering at him, I got the drop on the two, shot out their light, and lined them back against the wall. I wasn't going to do any killing, understand; all I wanted was my share. But the Mex must have hid a gun in the dark, for all of a sudden the fellow took a snapshot at me from the hip, and ducked. It missed, and, as he ran straight into the light, coming down that passage back there, I got him.

He went down on his face, and then Bob here and I mixed, until he saw a light, and blubbered out a decent proposition that caused me to let him up."

"What kind of a proposition?"

"A fair disposition of the spoils—three ways."

"Three ways! He told you about me, then?"

"Sure he did; I knew, anyhow. That's fair enough, isn't it?"

"Hell! I don't know whether it is or not."

"Now, see here, Garrity," broke in Meager gruffly. "It don't look to me as if there was anything else we could do. The 'Kid' got onto this himself. We both know he's all right, and, under these conditions, he ought to have his share. Hell! if he don't, I reckon we won't any of us get any. Besides, there's only the three of us left—Manuel and Sanchez are both dead. And say, do you know what 'Frisco' says he believes this damn tunnel is?"

"This tunnel? the cave you mean?"

"Sure, he says it's 'Alvara's Lost Mine'—and, by God! man, if it is, then maybe it's worth millions of coin."

Garrity made no response. Kelleen could not discern the expression of the man's face, but was suspicious that his hand rested threateningly on the butt of a revolver. The fellow was treacherous, unscrupu-

lous, miserly even in crime, capable of any act to assure his gain. There was only one safe way of dealing with him—the way of force, the heavy hand. Yet he would make one more endeavor.

"Well, Judge," Kelleen said quietly, "how do you like this plan?"

"I'm damned if I see why I should divide up with you. We were in here first, and, by your own confession, you've killed Manuel and Sanchez. I don't see any claim you've got."

"Then I'll try and make you see it," the voice like ice, the black barrel of his gun resting in the crook of his left arm. "Now, listen, both of you—lift your arms, Garrity! I'd prefer to settle this little matter peacefully between us, but if it is going to be war, I've got the drop. So, Judge, it is up to you. Either I'm in on this deal, a full partner, or else I'm in on it alone. Take your choice, and be damn quick about it."

"You mean—what is it you mean?"

"You are rather dull this morning, Garrity. I haven't much of a reputation for wasting words, have I? No doubt you have heard the 'Frisco Kid' knows how to shoot when needed? What more explanation do you want? I'm in on this deal, or you are a dead one—that's all. Now say which it is."

No man could have doubted the deadliness of Kel-

leen's meaning. Garrity knew the border code far too well to hesitate.

"Of course you're in. I—I only wanted to understand."

"You've got it clear enough now, but we'll play safe. Your friend Meager here is unarmed, and you will be far better off without the gun—throw it over into that corner."

"And leave you free to murder us both——"

"Sure, if I decide it's best. Only I don't usually do business that way. You have heard plenty of stories about me, but no one ever said I shot a man treacherously. If you two play square there is no danger; but this is a case of two pitted against one; either one of you would cut a throat for a five-dollar bill. I'll give you a minute—throw away that gun!"

He stood fronting them both, the two between him and the stronger light. His face was emotionless, but the voice speaking was crisp and hard. The two knew him only as a desperado, a border renegade, a man whose willingness to kill had been proven. There remained no choice. Garrity, growling forth an oath, flung his revolver into the dark corner savagely.

"Frisk him, Bob; I'm taking no chances this time—a knife, hey! rather an ugly tool, Garrity—do all judges carry them? Yes, throw it over there along

with the gun. Are you sure that is all? Now, Garrity, turn about is fair play; try your hand on Meager—stripped clean, is he? better feel inside his shirt; imagine he is a prisoner in your court. Good! Now, I reckon, we are in fair shape to discuss business together. First, gents, let me say this—I haven't the slightest objection in the world to killing both of you on general principles. I know your style, and I'm going to make the present situation perfectly clear. Both of you are damn rascals, capable of any dirty deviltry. You'd kill me in a minute if you only had a chance. I don't propose to give you that chance, for I know what my life is worth, and mean to protect it. I happen to need you just now alive, and, if you obey my orders, and answer my questions, you'll go away from here alive. If you don't, you'll be buried here—do you get that?"

They stared at him, without a word, Garrity sputtering, but totally unable to articulate.

"I see you do; so let's begin. Which one of you has been here before? What's that, Meager? Oh, the judge has. All right then, Garrity, tell me all about it."

"By God! you can't——"

"Oh, but I can; in fact, it is not necessary that I have your information. I can search this hole over your dead body, only I would rather do it my own

way, for reasons I'll explain. Do you want them?"

"You mean to kill us anyhow after you find the loot."

"No doubt that's your idea. That is what you would do, and you have me ticketed in the same class. Well, that doesn't happen to be my plan at all. In the first place, you've got me labeled wrong. I'm not really after the loot; I'm after you. Do you get that, Garrity? Meager here is just a common thief; he's a brute, and therefore dangerous, but a damn, sneaking coward. All I care particularly about him is to save a woman——"

"What woman?" the surprised question burst from the other fellow's lips, before he could restrain it.

"Deborah Meredith; the woman you forced into marriage with you. But Garrity here has been the evil genius of this border for the last ten years. There is no crime he hasn't had a finger in. But no one could catch him redhanded. Now I've got you both—got you good and hard. I'm going to bring you in, dead or alive—but alive if possible."

The eyes of the prisoners met; then both stared helplessly into the mouth of the leveled revolver.

"Who the hell are you?" burst forth Garrity, his face beaded with perspiration.

"My name is Kelleen, a captain of cavalry; I've been after you for three months."

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE SPOILS OF CRIME

“GOOD GOD! then you’re not the ‘Frisco Kid?’” “I’m all the ‘Kid’ there ever was,” Kelleen admitted carelessly. “That party was simply manufactured to order; here is where he ends his desperate career. I would have kept the secret awhile longer if I could, but perhaps it is just as well. Now we understand each other, Garrity, and the very best thing you can do will be to answer my questions.”

“You haven’t the power to make me.”

“Oh, yes I have, Judge—right here. I know exactly what you thought of me before; that I was an outlaw, with a price set on my head; that you could kill me if necessary, and no questions would ever be asked, or you could have me arrested later, and taken care of in that way. You have treated others by that formula, I believe. But it won’t work this time—do you see? The case has turned about; I am the officer of the law; I can kill you, and go free. I’ve not only got the drop, my man, but there are cavalry-men over at Box Canyon—you know that—and they will be up here looking for me pretty soon. So, either

dead or alive, you fellows take my orders. I want to get this thing straight. Meager says you've been in here before; is that right?"

"Yes—once."

"With Gomez?"

"No; when I knew he was away."

"Trying to find out what he had hidden away here, I suppose. Well, what did you discover?"

"Nothing; not a thing more than you have seen."

"But now you come back. You believe there is treasure here, fruit of robbery, of crime, and you came sneaking back after it—you, Meager, and Sanchez—how did you plan to get it?"

Garrity stood silent and sullen.

"You don't need to answer, for I know. Meager told that. You intended to torture the old devil until he confessed where it was concealed. You can't do that now because he is dead, and his secret died with him. There is only one way left, and that is to search. This is why I need you, Garrity, for I believe you know a lot more than you are confessing just yet."

Kelleen paused, turning quickly over in his mind what he had better attempt. He felt a profound contempt for his prisoners. Meager, while a physical giant, was mentally no more than a mere cowardly brute; Garrity might be truly dangerous—a sly,

treacherous villain, but physically unable to cope with him for a moment, and now utterly cowed. While he remained armed, and they were weaponless, he certainly had nothing to fear. His first intention had been to hold the fellows as prisoners, until the squad of troopers appeared; turn them over to the lieutenant in command, searching the cave later at his own leisure. But why wait? It might be an hour, two hours yet, before the soldiers arrived—and then there was Deborah. His thought leaped swiftly to the girl; what had happened to her during those long, dark hours? Where had she disappeared after he had been dashed from the rock? She had evidently escaped discovery; he knew that; had wandered off into the desert doubtless, might be there still, lost in those leagues of sand, struggling for life. The vision called to him, yet he could not seek her until after his men came. These prisoners were far too important to be left unguarded. His duty as an officer held him as in a vise.

But he realized at that moment a decision that his heart was with Deborah Meredith. He must find her, rescue her, and—thank God!—there was sufficient time in which to accomplish this. The hours since they had parted were not sufficient to expose the girl to any great peril; even if she was still wandering aimlessly on the desert the opportunity to find her, to save

her life, yet remained. Perhaps, after all, he might serve her best where he was, driving these men to full confession; then, with the troopers there to aid him, he would search that sand waste from end to end. It was all he could do; but he would never be content merely to sit there in semidarkness on guard. His jaw set with determination.

"When did you first learn that Gomez was hiding out in this neighborhood, Garrity?" he questioned suddenly.

"Six months ago. I saw him in Nogales."

"Privately?"

"Yes; we had some deals together before."

"Paid you for protection, did he? What did he want this time?"

"Provisions. I was to get him out grub at night; leave it at a certain spot. That was all."

"He didn't tell you where he was hiding out?"

"No, but he had plenty of money. I didn't get much information out of him; he never did trust anybody. The authorities had run him pretty close, I reckon; anyhow he was all alone, not one of his gang left. When I couldn't find out anything more, I got Meager to come up here."

"After the older Meager was killed?"

"Sure; that gave us a chance."

"I see; the papers were all in your possession; not above doctoring them, were you?"

"What the hell is that to you?"

"Not a great deal to me, perhaps, but of some importance to a couple of women I know—one of them a friend of mine. Old Tom Meager left an invalid widow, whom you fellows have, I believe, robbed systematically, and then there is the girl Bob forced into marriage. You didn't suppose I knew about all this, I imagine—well, I'm going to get to the very bottom of it before we are through. But just now I want to use the two of you. We'll find out between us just what Manuel did have hidden away in this hole. Line up there against the wall; face about the other way! Now listen; I've got both guns, my own, and the one Garrity threw away; they are cocked and within three feet of your backs. I can't possibly miss you, and if you make one move, except as I tell you, I'm going to let drive. Are you ready?"

"Ready for what?"

"To do as I order. All right, then; there is plenty of light for me to see you by at this distance. Move forward slowly—Garrity, you keep your hand on the wall, and you, Meager, take hold of Garrity's sleeve; now don't forget; if you do it's sure fatal. Go on slow, a step at a time."

They came to the curve in the side wall; beyond this was a zone of darkness even this late in the day, but far down the passage the little stream of light from off the desert above enabled Kelleen to keep in view the outlines of his captives. If there was really a secret room in this tunnel he had located its most probable position in his own mind, and had fixed upon the first point to explore.

"Move on," he said sternly, as the two hesitated to advance. "I'll tell you when to stop. Pick up that lantern, Meager; it hasn't any glass, but will do, if we need a light."

They circled the bodies of the two dead men lying in the pool of radiance which fell on them from above. Sanchez, huddled up like a dog, rested with his face against the rock floor, but the other stared upward, every ghastly feature revealed. Garrity gave one glance, and turned his eyes away.

"Ever see that boy before, Judge?"

"Believe I did, once. Copied a map of this country in my office; said he was hunting a claim."

"Tell you his name?"

"No; I wasn't interested."

"All right, then; one of you light the wick in that lantern. No, I'd rather have you take it, Meager; get back farther out of the draught. Now hold it up,

and we'll find out where this passage leads. Walk closer together."

They advanced again some ten or twelve steps down an opening scarcely wide enough for the two to pass abreast, Kelleen's gaze wandering from the backs of his prisoners to the gray walls on either side. The light flickered, yet revealed no opening, until they came to the very end, and fronted the solid rock. Even then, for an instant, Kelleen failed to perceive the narrow cleft to the left beside Meager, but the latter, excited by the discovery, thrust the sputtering lantern forward, holding it at arm's length, above a rough stone slab which half barred the way.

"Hell's fire! Look there!" he cried excitedly, almost dropping the light.

Garrity craned his neck to see, both men so wild at the sudden discovery as to lose all thought of everything else. Even Kelleen, revolver in hand, and fully awake to the danger of his position, pushed forward far enough to gain a partial glimpse within. Meager started to climb over, but the judge stood motionless, breathing hard, his hands gripped on the stone, his eyes glaring about the oddly shaped room, probably originally a cavern formed by water, but enlarged by the efforts of men. The whole apartment might have measured fifteen by ten feet, barely high enough to

stand erect in, the walls varicolored and sparkling in the rays of the uplifted lantern. At the farther extremity lay a pile of débris, scattered rock, and powdered stone, as though resting just as they fell after an explosion, the entire end almost totally covered. Protruding from this pile, clearly revealed, now that Meager had found footing inside, and held the blazing wick higher, was the white, ghastly skeleton of a man, his bones still covered with bits of ragged cloth. Caught by a falling rock, he had been pinned there helpless until he died.

The three men scarcely saw all this, or gave it a thought, for there, immediately in front, and all about them, unarranged, scattered in heaps, lying where they had been thrown carelessly over that outer barrier of rock, rested the miscellaneous spoils of a thousand robberies, the sack of churches and towns; jewels torn from women's hands, silver and gold, rich booty of crime from midnight raids, and the burning of cities—the hidden treasures of old Manuel Gomez. It was unbelievable, staggering. What suffering, what death, what cruelty and torture, did these things picture! And wealth—wealth! Who could even calculate its value? Bloodstained, crime-gotten, the fruits of fifty years of outlawry, here was gathered, in one vast heap, wealth to make the mind of man helpless to grasp its value.

Garrity, digging his fingers frantically into the stone, unconscious of what he did, his eyes blazing with sudden, uncontrollable madness, dragged himself over the barrier. He had lost all reason, all fear; with a mad cry he gathered up into his arms all that he could grasp — golden crucifix, chaliced goblet, a great silver link glittering with pearls, a jeweled bodice blazing in the light — laughed like a fiend as he hugged them close, then staggered on in wild ecstasy, a string of oaths breaking from his lips. Something tripped him and he fell, his arms flung blindly out; a gripping hand struck the lantern from Meager's grasp, flinging it, still blazing, a half-dozen feet away. An instant there was silence, a mere flicker of light, which shot along the floor as though on a trail of powder — then a glare and roar, a blast of flame, a report, as if a thousand cannon had exploded; and utter darkness.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE FINDING OF GOMEZ

THE little squad of cavalry moved up the creek bottom with much caution. The rangy young lieutenant, exercising his first independent command, was determined to neglect no precautions. Indeed he was not quite satisfied in his own mind that he should yield to the anxious insistence of this girl who had so strangely appeared in his camp. She was decidedly pretty, and she interested him, yet he was not altogether without suspicion. He had been given strict orders, and her sudden arrival had disarranged all his previous plans. At first he had been disinclined to advance at all, but the sergeant had sided in with the girl, and overcome his objections. The sergeant knew Captain Kelleen, and, because of twenty years' service, ventured to express himself rather freely. Lieutenant Carr, while inclined to resent this, nevertheless realized his own inexperience, and, finally with reluctance, gave the necessary order. But he did not purpose to take any unnecessary risks. If Kelleen was already dead there surely was no reason to hurry, as they could be of no assistance; perhaps this was all a ruse to lead him into a trap. The girl had admitted there were a num-

ber of men in the valley — how many she did not know — probably far outnumbering his small force. Carney, the sergeant, permitted him to have his own way, laughing a bit to himself, however, and so they jogged along slowly, a couple of scouts well in advance, with a vedette on either flank, watchful of the desert on either side.

Deborah begged for haste, but the officer remained adamant, and, at last, in despair, utterly wearied, her mind in a chaos, she rode on listlessly beside him. Kelleen must be dead; she dare not even dream anything else. She had heard the shot, seen the burst of flame, caught sight of his toppling body plunging over the edge of the cliff. The men who shot him had no doubt; they had fired to kill, believed they had killed; and gone away satisfied — Bob Meager and the Mexican. She shivered at the memory of them. Her husband! that murderer her husband! He could claim her, would claim her if he lived; legally she belonged to him. The ceremony was sacrilege, a hideous mockery, yet it was legal, legal; it left her forever in the power of that brute. She shuddered at recollection of that scene in the ranchhouse, the leering, drunken faces, the sharp voice of Judge Garrity, the brutal grip with which Bob Meager held her, those hateful words which bound her to such unspeakable shame. And then the struggle to save herself; the hours of torture waiting for his com-

ing, the broken door, the clutch of his hands, the hot, drunken breath on her face, the blow which set her free. Good God! could this all be true! The fresh night air, the escape through the black night, the meeting with Daniel Kelleen.

He had been a man, a real man; he had died for her. Unchecked, unnoticed the tears welled into her eyes, and fell on the saddle pommel. She could see nothing but his face, realize nothing but that they were riding now to bring back his body. She had almost known before that she loved him, but now, in bereavement and despair, she comprehended that all the brightness and hope had gone from life. She yet lived, must continue to live—the wife of Bob Meager.

Under a high, burning sun, reflected back into their faces from off the leagues of sand, the little party rode steadily forward, seeing nothing but the drear desert. The strain and stillness left them silent, lolling wearily in the saddles, listless eyes scanning the dreariness ahead. The lieutenant occasionally glanced aside at the girl, but he found no words to speak, she was such a pathetic figure. So he rode grimly on, and left her mercifully to her own thoughts.

It must have been nearly noon when the little cavalcade debouched from the bed of the stream, forced their jaded horses up the bank, and came to where the riders

could look down into the half-concealed valley below. The advance scouts waited them here among the rocks, to point out the trail, curving downward through a ravine. They had discovered no signs of recent passage, no marks of hoofs; nor were there any signs of human presence in the lower valley.

The lieutenant studied the scene through his glasses, yet vaguely suspicious of some trick, consulted with the sergeant, and finally spoke to Deborah.

"This must be the place," he said, "but it seems deserted. Do you recognize anything?"

"Yes, although I have never been here before. The Casebeer outfit were yonder, just beyond that bend. I told you they were unloading the mules, and Captain Kelleen said they were going back, anxious to get away before daybreak."

"You think then they have already left?"

"Yes, long ago. If any people remain in the valley it will be Meager and some of the men with him. I explained all that to you."

The officer flushed.

"Yes, yes, I know, but it is my duty to be cautious. Could you guide us from here?"

She sat straight in the saddle, a new light in her eyes, as she pointed the directions.

"I can never forget. Straight ahead down there is

where they were storing the things—a fire burned there by that big rock; you can see a whisp of smoke even now. This trail must lead direct. Over there," she hid her face for an instant in her hands as though to shut out the sight, "is the cliff over which Captain Kelleen fell, and just beyond, at the upper end of the valley is the cave I told you about. I—I am going down whether you and your soldiers come or not. I—I must learn the truth."

She forced her horse forward, and the others followed, waiting for no command, the sergeant riding almost beside her in the narrow trail. They found the storehouse, back within the shadow of the great rock, so concealed by trees as to be invisible a few yards away. It was deserted, unguarded; and satisfied as to this fact, convinced by a hundred signs that the entire outfit had indeed returned the way they came, the lieutenant scattered his force to explore the upper valley. His mood had changed from suspicion of this girl to faith in her strange story. Things were exactly as she had described. Dismounted, their horses being led behind them in readiness for any emergency, the squad advanced, the men with carbines in their hands. The sergeant kept close in against the southern cliff until he came to where Deborah pointed out the spot of Kelleen's fall. They found no body, no signs to indicate

any such tragedy. Carney gazed about in perplexity.

"You are sure this is the place, miss?" he asked doubtfully.

"Yes, Sergeant; we were on the rock up there, the one jutting out over the edge; there is no other spot like it."

His eyes, narrowed, surveyed the distance, marking every detail.

"Then it's likely he struck them trees, miss, and there may be a ledge there that he lit on. I'm going up."

He fought his way from rock to rock, with difficulty finding foot and handhold, winding in and out of crevices, and using every shrub to aid his progress upward. Once or twice he paused, as though blocked, clinging to the face of the cliff like a fly, yet found a way, and went on. Those below watched breathlessly until the man finally crept over an outcropping ledge, imperceptible from where they stood, and disappeared. It seemed as though he was gone a long while. Deborah, hand pressed on her heart, never removed her eyes from the spot, or stirred. What had he found up there? Surely he must have discovered something—the dead, mangled body, no doubt. Then he appeared again, alone, standing up and gazing down at them. His voice as he hailed them below, sounded clear, exultant, a new ring in its tone.

"He ain't here, miss, but, by God, sir, I believe he's alive."

Deborah could not speak, could not utter a sound. Alive! Alive! why that was impossible; her very heart seemed to stop beating. She could only stare up at the man dazed and helpless. It was the lieutenant who answered.

"You say he is alive, Carney?"

"Well, he sure left here alive, sir, and on his own legs. I found the place where he come down, an' where he got on his feet again. There wasn't nobody else here helpin' him, an' he started off along this ledge—limpin' a bit, I should say, but goin' alone. Whatever happened since, sir, he certainly left here able to navigate. May-be I better follow the trail?"

"Yes, go on, Sergeant."

Deborah's limbs trembled so she could scarcely walk for the first few steps. She clung gratefully to the lieutenant's arm, her gaze never deserting the man moving cautiously along the narrow ledge of rock high above them. Alive! Daniel Kelleen was alive! Nothing else mattered; nothing else had any place in her mind—through some strange miracle of God, Daniel Kelleen was alive! The sense of her surroundings came back as they advanced, the memory of it all quickening her perceptions, as strength returned. He was alive

after his fall, able to walk—to plan. What would he most naturally do? To seek her then was impossible, and he had remembered that cave which she had described. He must have been seeking it; his trail led directly there. Her hands clasped tightly at the officer's sleeve.

"Have the sergeant hurry; please have him hurry! He doesn't need to trace Captain Kelleen's trail. I—I am sure I know where he was going."

"Where was that?"

"To the cave I had found, and told him about; it is there just beyond that mound. Good God, Lieutenant, there are horses grazing yonder—they have found him already."

There were two animals in a little cove, hobbled, and nibbling at the short grass, but both saddled and bridled. They had the Meager ranch brand on their flanks, and the sergeant, joining the party below, easily followed the trail of two men on foot until they circled the mound of earth, and ascended the opposite side. Deborah pressed her way forward, too eager now to be longer held back, yet fully realizing the danger confronting them.

"Be careful here," she warned. "They are certainly in there—two or three, at least, and they will shoot. Here, Sergeant, let me show you; I know the way."

They crept up, the three of them, the two men with weapons drawn, keeping close in under the partial protection of the cliff. Behind four or five troopers followed, with carbines thrown forward. Nothing opposed their progress; the very mystery adding to the strain on their nerves. To Deborah it became almost unbearable—surely they must be there, just behind that leaf screen, Bob Meager and the Mexican, Sanchez; those were their horses—and that ape-man! Why were they so still? What caused them to hold back their fire? Could it be possible they were all back in the tunnel, with no guard set? And Kelleen! what had happened to Kelleen?

They were already before the clinging vines; her hands trembled as she forced these aside revealing the black vacancy behind. The startled sergeant pressed them farther back, staring bewildered into the void, his service revolver thrust forward, an oath breaking from his lips.

“By God! but this beats hell, sir. Damn it, but I’m goin’ in!”

He went over the barrier of rock unmolested, unstopped, and recklessly Deborah followed. The lieutenant paused an instant.

“Jones, you and Calhoun follow us; the others remain out here. Keep your eyes open, lads.”

The next moment he had also scrambled through the opening, and crouched down beside the trembling girl. Just ahead the two could dimly distinguish Carney, leaning forward, peering into the total darkness beyond.

"It's—it's perfectly level, the floor is," she whispered. "You can follow along the wall—I did."

They advanced together slowly, feeling their way, scarcely a sound breaking the silence. Suddenly the sergeant, slightly in advance, stopped, feeling at something on the floor with his feet; then he stooped over.

"By God, here's a dead man!"

"A dead man! Are you sure?"

"He's dead all right, sir. Where's the flash-light? We've got to find out what this means."

"Jones has it; Jones, come up here. Give me the flash."

The round glare of light struck the side walls, swept over the still kneeling sergeant, glinting on his drawn weapon, and then touched the motionless body outstretched on the floor. At last it rested on the upturned face. The sergeant stared down as though he saw a ghost.

"By God!" he ejaculated at last, "by God! it's the old devil himself. What's that, Carney! you know him?"

"Know him! Why, sir, Lieutenant, it's Gomez,

Manuel Gomez — there's fifty thousand dollars on him dead or alive. Well, he's dead all right."

"Gomez, the outlaw; but are you sure?"

"Sure," the sergeant rose to his feet and swung about. "Sure? Hell! — begging your pardon, sir — why shouldn't I be sure? I've chased that old fox ever since I've been in the army, twenty years, sir. Twice we were after him down in old Mexico. It's Manuel Gomez lying there, and it was a knife that killed him."

The boy lieutenant's face was white in the reflected light, but his lips were firmly set.

"Well, he's dead now," he said sternly, "and it is up to us to find out what all this means."

He lifted the flash from off the upturned face, and sent it dancing along the gray walls into the black chasm ahead.

CHAPTER XXX

THE MESSAGE OF LIFE

“**B**UT, Lieutenant, this ain’t no cave, sir; it’s a bloomin’ mine,” a voice spoke from behind in tone of surprise.

“What makes you think that, Calhoun?”

“Cause it’s been blasted out mostly, sir, or else picked. I’ve been a miner myself, and ought to know. Maybe there was a cave yere once, but I tell yer, sir, these yere walls have been hand-worked, or I’m a piker.”

“All right, we’ve got to explore the passage just the same. Come on, men.”

He flashed the warning light ahead, as they advanced, taking his own place beside the sergeant, and compelling Deborah to remain behind with the two soldiers. As the passage curved to the right the leaders crept forward with extreme caution, to gain view of what lay hidden beyond, Carr reaching out his hand to send the flicker of light dancing down the narrowed tunnel. The flashing rays brought no response, awoke no sound of movement, and Carney ventured to protrude his head far enough around the protecting rock to gain view of what was beyond. The flash-light was

no longer needed to reveal the scene. At the end of the passage, down through that slight opening leading to the desert above, streamed the glare of day, white and dazzling to his eyes after the pitch darkness in which he had been blindly feeling his way forward. It rested, a pool of light on the floor, and in its very center, every detail outlined as in an etching, were two bodies, one face downward, curled in grotesque shape, the other lying at full length, features upturned to the low roof. Beyond these the flare of the flash-light, leaping across this narrow space of day, exhibited a jumbled mass of rock, blocking the passage from top to bottom. They seemed to have attained the very end of things.

The startled sergeant stared speechless—first at those motionless bodies, death pictured in each attitude; then beyond at a strange, ghastly, white face, on which the search-light fantastically played. Suddenly something else reflected into his eyes, the sparkle of an uplifted revolver's polished tube.

"Who are you?" asked a hoarse voice sternly. "Stop there until you answer."

"My God, sir!" was the instant cry. "I'm Carney, Sergeant Carney, Captain. We've come here for you, sir."

The threatening revolver sank weakly, and Carney and the lieutenant, oblivious to all else, rushed forward,

circling the two dead bodies in their eagerness to reach the one live man beyond, held helpless in that fall of rock. Deborah, left in the darkness behind, groped her way forward, dazed, speechless, only one fact echoing in her mind—he was alive, Daniel Kelleen was alive!

He lifted his head, and looked at them, trying to smile.

"God, but it is good to see you, Sergeant," he managed to say. "I—I thought you would never come. This darkness; those dead men out there, and—and I couldn't move. No, I don't believe I'm badly hurt; only just caught me, that's all—a single second more, and I'd gone free." His face lit up suddenly, his eyes brightening with recognition. "You—you here, too, Deborah Meredith! Why—why I have been worrying about you; lying here in the dark I haven't thought of much else; I—I kept seeing you wandering alone out there in the desert."

She dropped to her knees, and drew his head into the comfort of her lap, her hand smoothing back his hair. There were glistening, unshed tears in her eyes, and he saw them.

"No, I got away," she explained hastily. "They did not see me at all, and then God guided me to your men."

"I know part of it—Meager told me."

"Bob Meager?" her heart choked her. "He was really here with you then? What—what happened? Can you tell me? they will have those rocks dug away in a moment."

"Yes, yes, he was here, he and Garrity—the judge, you know. They—they are both in there now, buried under tons of rock. I—hardly know what did happen; it all came on us in a flash. There was a tunnel in here, a room, where old Alvara had been mining years and years ago. He must have died there all alone, for I saw his skeleton on a pile of stone. Then those two went in—Meager and Garrity—with a broken lantern. I—I think one of them fell, and—and there must have been some powder left there—powder old Alvara had, maybe, a lot of it. I—I saw the flash, and jumped back—they are there yet, buried."

"Bob Meager is dead?"

"Crushed to a pulp."

His head sank back helplessly, and his eyes closed. Carney and Jones rolled the last stone from off the imprisoned limbs, but he lay insensible. The three soldiers bore him out through the black passage to the entrance, and, with the assistance of those others outside, lifted his body over the rock barrier, between the clinging vines into the sunlight. Deborah never left his side, and as they placed the body on the short turf, his head

rested again on her arm. The sergeant knelt, and felt the outstretched limbs.

"Badly bruised, and perhaps crushed a bit," he said at last, "but I doubt if there is a bone broken. He'll be all right presently. One of you fellows bring a canteen. Now, miss, a little water will do the captain more good than anything else. What is it, Lieutenant?"

"We can hardly move him at present, Sergeant. He'll have to rest awhile before he can ride. Perhaps we better search those bodies back there, and dispose of them in some way."

"Very well, sir."

They disappeared together, all but two troopers left on guard; below in the valley the troop horses grazed in the sunshine. Deborah, bathing the white face gently, waited with wildly beating heart. She was free, free, and Daniel Kelleen lived. There was nothing else in life to think about.

He slowly opened his eyes, and smiled up at her, as though her being there was the most natural thing in the world.

"The blue sky," he said, his voice trembling, "how beautiful it is. God! but it is good to get out of that hole, with dead men everywhere."

"Yes," she replied, "but don't try to talk now; that is all over with."

"But I want to talk," he insisted. "It keeps me from thinking; it makes me know it is all real — this blue sky, and you."

"Then if you must, tell me what happened; it seems almost a miracle."

"It was a miracle, and I am not sure but you were God's messenger," he replied soberly. Then slowly, hesitatingly, prompted now and then by a question, he told his story, his voice growing stronger as he spoke. The guard sat on a rock a dozen feet away, their carbines between their knees, eyes on the deserted valley below. The girl bent over eagerly, seeking not to lose a word. At the end Kelleen asked suddenly.

"The paper you took from the boy's hand — what was it?"

"Only a map, very roughly drawn, and written on in Spanish. I could make little out of it — see."

She held it out before him, a yellow, creased paper, looking a century old. He held it for a moment in his own hands, peering at the crisscross of lines impatiently.

"Perhaps it was one Alvara left," he said slowly, "and the boy had found. He followed the rainbow to the end."

"And we will never know?"

"No; the end was death."

They were quiet a long while; then his hand moved

THE MESSAGE OF LIFE

and touched her own. Her eyes, which had been on the valley, dropped wonderingly to his face.

"This is not all, is it—just to be alive again?" he asked softly.

"I—I hardly know what you mean."

"Back there in the tunnel," he insisted, "when I first looked up into your eyes I read a message; I want to read it again."

"A message—are you sure?"

"Yes, dear, I am sure; it was a message of love."

She was no longer looking at him, and she caught her breath. Then their eyes met once more.

"It is the same message always, Daniel Kelleen," she said simply.

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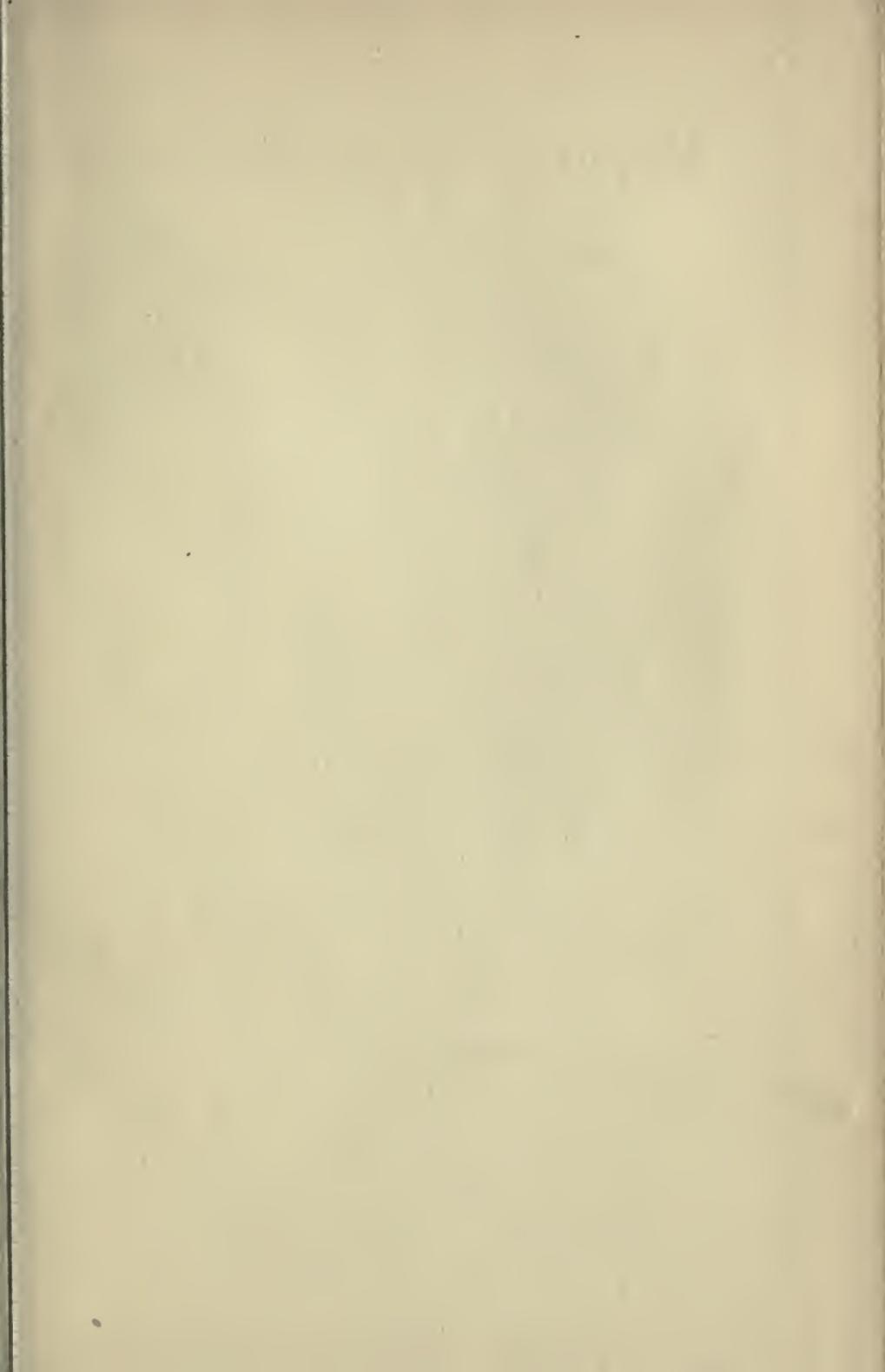
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